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An inquiry into the creative working processes and practices of classical and contemporary vocal improvisation

Wilén, Sara

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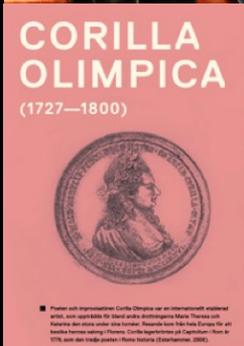


Singing in Action

An inquiry into the creative working processes and practices of classical and contemporary vocal improvisation

SARA WILÉN

FACULTY OF PERFORMING ARTS | MALMÖ ACADEMY OF MUSIC | LUND UNIVERSITY



Singing in Action

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An inquiry into the creative working processes
and practices of classical and contemporary vocal
improvisation

Sara Wilén



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Faculty of Performing Arts
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For my family

... our concept of 'the original', of 'the song', simply makes no sense in oral tradition (Lord, 2003, p. 101).

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Before you start reading, please take a look at this video.¹



Video example 1: A Kaleidoscope of improvisations
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4KRIHefikzc&feature=youtu.be>

¹ The non-English films are texted in English on Youtube.

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Abstract

This dissertation explores performative perspectives on classical and contemporary vocal improvisation (CCVI) as a critical, creative tool for development of and research in vocal performance. It consists of one introductory part and five articles, with additional documentation on a homepage. The artistic projects have been performed in close collaboration with fellow classically trained singers and musicians. The practice of CCVI is contextualised in relation to vocal history, opera, improvisation practice(s) and research in vocal performance. The artistic methods of opera improvisation, lyrical improvisation and CCVI without words are described in text and video. The studies performed also investigate how theoretical concepts such as performativity, action and interperformativity can be used for articulating aspects of communication, creativity and knowledge in CCVI.

Central to the thesis is a suggested model for analysing performativity in three dimensions: the structural, the symbolic and the individual. Performative aspects of the singer's subject positions as a vocal and instrumental persona in a classical vocal concert approach and an opera performance approach are articulated and problematised in the artistic practice. New artistic performance concepts and projects are presented. CCVI is used as a creative artistic tool for singers in critical dialogue with classical vocal performance tradition: deconstructing methods of portraying gender and power in operatic performance; opera improvisation with symphonic orchestra; composed and improvised opera with choirs; abstract improvisation in dialogue with visual art; improvisation with poetry and electronics and deconstructing Lied performance in dialogue with light design. An interview study focusing on the experiences and perspectives of the improvisers indicate that presence, relations to one another in the ensemble, relations to the emerging material, and the creation of common agreements and structures are central in CCVI. Three analytical models focusing on interaction in CCVI are presented: action analysis in improvisation, the Interplay Analysis Model and the use of the concept musico-performative tropes. It is suggested that improvisers in CCVI create music, text and dramatic content as vocal and musical actions by the intuitive use of musical and performative tropes in an interperformative play with the performance context as well as the classical singing tradition.

Thank you...

An enormous thank you (words are not enough) to all my fellow improvising friends and acquaintances made during this journey, most of all (in alphabetical order) Conny Antonov, Therese Badman Stenius, Gregor Bergman, Linus Flogell, David Hornwall, Samuel Jarrick, Fredrik af Klint, Mette af Klint, Alexandra Orrgård Solén and Ulrika Skarby. A great thank you also to Kristofer Langerbeck, Tiina Markkanen, Fabio Monni, Fritjof Palm, Magdolna Szabó and Jonatan Sersam.

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And most of all: thank you my beloved family and dear friends for your patience.

Chaos in the birdhouse

The stage lights project their energy straight into my eyes. The pale, wooden floor is somewhat sloping under my feet, down, towards the orchestra pit. I know that I have friends there; the oboist, the violinist, the conductor. We share the same sounding space and play together, no matter what takes place on stage. Beyond my instrumental colleagues and the conductor is the huge, friendly audience. I am all dressed up in black and white, like a cartoon figure; with a tight waist and fluffy skirt, with a stiff, white apron. Feathers grow from my back. My ginger red hair is backcombed in a high wave, straight up from the skull, aiming for the ceiling, and crowned with a cute, tiny red hat. Some hours ago, I was painted like a canvas. In the mirror I could see a human bird take over the usual view. A pride Wyandotte hen, and yet a bitter middle-aged housekeeper (or a head waitress at a local city hotel, as the costume designer put it), longing for the love of my boss: the doctor, or the turkey.

The walls around us are covered with light wooden panels, with thick, black metal sticks pointing straight out. At some points in the operatic sceneries we are to jump up, or climb on these, as high as we dare, preferably two meters up. We are in a giant birdhouse, and all singers wear soft dancing shoes. The Rossinian streams of melodies and gestures that surround us make my heels lift from the floor, and I enjoy my movements as I imagine a dancer would feel, phrasing the rhythms with my feet. The Barber of Seville is indeed no dramatic masterpiece, but more of a satiric, delicious opera buffa. I am so happy that the director has made this reading, where the absurd is enhanced, and we are not supposed to be realistic characters. I enjoy our joint playing together in the ensemble, switching between the scenic situation and the musico-choreographic situations. Sometimes these correlate completely. Then they start to diverge again, like a giant kaleidoscope of presences in parallel spaces. As I face the audience and embody my situated reactions to the directed actions, I suddenly see two singers on stage initiate a private conversation with their eyes. They are making personal jokes and ironic faces, with their backs to the audience. Two guys have a silent laugh at work, listening to each other, creating a personal layer, a private high-five situation within the professional stage setting.

In a flip of a second the kaleidoscopic presences burst like soap bubbles. I am plunged from the imaginary Italian city house, through the silly birdhouse, across the major chords into my own private body, wondering what is so freaking funny that it could not wait until we are off stage. My face feels a bit tight, covered as it is in colourful water paint. I experience how a wave of uncertainty flows through the other singers on stage, which make them stiff, as the joint performing energy evaporates. Still the orchestra plays on, the voices deliver, the light changes, the audience smiles, listen, sleeps and coughs, just as expected.

It happened, and yet it never took place. The agreements were broken and chaos entered on stage, inside of the giant slow tanker of operatic time and place. I feel isolated, and struggle to keep my

line of energy and continue my action, relying on the body in the music, the contact with the orchestra and the audience, instead of approaching my fellow singers.

This episode above took place during a couple of seconds in a performance some years ago. Still, there is something that makes me go back to this experience again and again. This situation symbolised something that I perceive as negative in the rituals of classical vocal repertoire performance. The validation of the voice, and to follow the score perfectly is much more important and evaluated higher than ensemble interaction within a joint stage presence. To dare to open your mouth as a classical singer and let something out to be heard solo on a stage, or the sounding space, is to enter a sacred place, where there is a limited amount of time to be filled with attention and energy from an audience. As a classical singer, I know this. It is a space where one does not enter if one is not worthy and prepared. Singers will be evaluated from how they interpret the score and the qualities of her/his sounding voice. As a classical singer you even create this sacred space around you whenever you practice, in terms of trying to make the right sound every time. Consequentially, a singer that sings really well is highly evaluated even if s/he breaks most of the interactional agreements with the colleagues on stage during a performance.

To stand in front of an audience without knowing what to do is a freedom compared to this: to stand in front of an audience and know just too well what I should do. Or what me and my instrument; that is, my tissues, muscles, cavities and my brain should do. Be in the music and be a singer. Stand as thousands of other classical singers have around the world and sing composed music, beautifully and patiently, over all the splices and imagined cracks in the voice and in the room. Sound through all the gaps and voids and maintain contact with the others on stage and in the pit below and the audience further away. Being inside a character, in a situation and yet very seldom being inside, because there are so many other things that occur on a big stage: a stage light being redirected, a conductor giving an upbeat in the monitor, a bowl rolling over the floor because the tape underneath it was not there today, a string section that is a bit slower than what I perceive as the pulse in my scenic body, colleagues making private, funny faces with their backs to the audience.

The singing in total focus, the struggle of meeting your own voice and search for ways to make it sound as good as possible although the body is a complete other than yesterday. Composed music surrounds us and covers everything in a sounding, forgiving, righteous mass. And then the musical work continues, rolls out, surges and struggles on its way out in the room, through layers of attention inside the humans in the audience. And we try to fill it, against better knowing, for how could it be possible to embody the music as it deserves and has sounded before? The ravenous, tired, furious voice inside, tearing holes in the lines with its constant evaluation of the sounding voice that vibrates through the flesh.

Project design

This dissertation is designed as a compilation thesis, consisting of this introductory part and five articles. The artistic research projects are presented in Wilén (2013b, 2015, manuscript submitted for publication a), in this introductory part and documented on a homepage.

In this section the project - together with its aims and research questions - are presented, along with an outline of the five articles and a link to the homepage. *CCVI in context* gives a brief introduction to the practice of CCVI. The practice of CCVI is contextualised in relation to notions of vocal history, opera, improvisation practice(s) and research in vocal performance. Four examples that form part of the project are presented in detail, followed by descriptions of three areas of CCVI practice from the perspective of the performer: opera improvisation, lyrical improvisation and CCVI without words in dialogue with other artistic elements.

The chapter *Artistic research as situated processes: performativity, action and situation(s)* gives an outline of theoretical and methodological concepts and ideas, discussed in relation to analytical levels and the artistic practice. *Projects and Analyses* include a number of examples from productions and performances, as well as an interview study, modes of presenting perspectives of the improvisers and three examples of analytical models, concepts and methods developed in relation to the video documented material and the writing, in order to track the interaction between performers during the improvisational processes (Action Analysis, Interplay analysis model, musico-performative tropes). In *Conclusions* insights and experiences from the work in the project are discussed in relation to the aims, purposes and research questions.

Articles

Five texts/articles form part of this dissertation. Three are published (2013-2014) and two are under review.

1. *Singing in action – intertextual and interperformative play in opera improvisation* (Wilén, 2013a).

This text discusses the practice of opera improvisation as a means to go in dialogue with music and performance culture in the Western classical field, inspired by perspectives from cultural theory. Concepts of intertextuality and interperformativity are suggested as tools to analyse and understand aspects of opera improvisation and lyrical improvisation as postmodern musical practices.

2. *In search of oscillating relations – power, gender, remix in operatic performance* (Wilén, 2013b).

This text is an investigation of how deconstruction can be used as a method for developing new artistic performance techniques in order to problematise the artistic agency of the opera singer. With examples from the project *Opera Nova – power, love, remix*, (ON), it describes how OI used the interchange of traditional roles and contrasting readings (such as realism and parody) of vocal scores, for addressing, challenging and deconstructing norms of power and gender in operatic repertoire performance.

3. *A kaleidoscope of interactions. Researching and presenting processes of opera improvisation* (Wilén, 2015).

The text focuses on aspects of method development in this doctoral project. An interview study with singers and pianists from Impromans and Operaimprovisatörerna (OI)² is presented along with the Interplay Analysis Model (IAM) emanating from the categorization of the interview results. The article describes how IAM, which is firmly based in the collective experience and insight of singers and pianists in the improvising ensembles was further developed into a tool for analysing musico-dramatic communication as vocal and musical actions.

² This project would not have been possible without the cooperation with present and previous singers and pianists in Operaimprovisatörerna: Therese Badman, Gregor Bergman, Linus Flogell, David Hornwall, Samuel Jarrick, Fredrik af Klint, Mette af Klint, Alexandra Orrgård Solén and Ulrika Skarby.

4. *Knowing in action – improvisation as a tool for artistic, creative development for classical singers.*

This text applies performativity as an overarching research perspective. I discuss classical vocal improvisation as an artistic critical tool for classical performers to investigate their own cultural capital and norms in performance. Improvisation provides the opportunity to address symbolic, structural and individual layers of performativity in the artistic work. The text takes its vantage point in theoretical notions of performativity in relation to examples from three performance productions in the context of OI

5. *Classical vocal improvisation in context – the musical canon, gender and creativity.*

This text offers a contextualizing discussion of vocal improvisation as a practice in the Western classical music field. The development of improvisation in Western classical music history is outlined with regards to musical works and the musical canon, as well as to the implications of this practice for classical performers today. Vocal improvisation is firmly rooted in classical music performance up until the mid-18th century, when it declined as a consequence of the development of Western public music institutions. The text argues that improvisation offers a vital creative and critical tool for classical singers and musicians on all levels, also today.

A digital archive

An independent homepage contains an archive, with more detailed project descriptions and documentation of performances.

www.singinginaction.com

Purpose and aims

In this part, the project is presented together with the aims and research questions.

The title of this research project is *Singing in action – an inquiry into the creative working processes and practices of classical and contemporary vocal improvisation (SIA)*. The main purpose is to investigate classical and contemporary vocal improvisation as a critical and creative tool for the development of and research in vocal performance. Consequently, the project has two main aims: i) to investigate

how CCVI can be researched on/through/in practice in relation to classical vocal performance tradition, and ii) to investigate how CCVI can be analysed and communicated from the perspective of the singer, in order to problematise classical vocal music performance practice, its concert culture and modes of production.

The following research questions further define the aims:

- How can CCVI processes be investigated, articulated and communicated?
- How can classical contemporary vocal improvisation be used as a means to challenge and problematise norms and practices in classical vocal performance?
- How can theoretical concepts such as (inter)performativity, action, deconstruction and tropes be used as investigative tools in artistic practice and analysis?

In the work with developing tools to articulate, situate, contextualise and communicate the multi-fold processes of improvisational interaction from a singer's perspective, theoretical concepts have been investigated and discussed in relation to artistic practice and modes of analysis. The goals of this project are to:

- i. develop methods for the analysis and communication of the interplay and musico-dramatic actions in performance,
- ii. recontextualise insights and ideas inspired by theoretical vantage points and issues emanating from scholarly studies into the artistic practice,
- iii. develop performance/production concepts and methods.

An important artistic research aim is the creation and development of a platform for experimentation and development of artistic experience through CCVI. Following the nature of the CCVI practices, these are mainly collaborative creative processes. This investigation has been performed in close collaboration with fellow classically trained singers and musicians, focusing on the *communicative aspects of the interplay between the performers*. It distinguishes CCVI from most performance practices in the classical/art music field, where aesthetical qualities of a musical result in terms of a work or a product set the frames for the musical processes of production and perception.

A final aim is also to explore modes of artistic research documentation. I have articulated the experiences of this project in mediated materials such as this introductory part, the articles and the digital archive on the homepage.

Delimitations

This dissertation project is situated within the young, developing field of artistic research in music. It focuses on what I call classical and contemporary vocal improvisation (CCVI), that is, vocal improvisation conducted by classically trained singers and musicians in dialogue with the classical repertoire performance practice. Other vital lines of Western vocal improvisation, such as baroque improvisation, free musical improvisation, improvised poetry and stand-up comedy will not be addressed here. Likewise, classical singing technique is not in focus for the investigation.

I investigate improvisation as a critical, performative tool in artistic research. For this purpose, I employ analytical concepts from research fields such as cultural studies, performance research and musicology from a vocal performance perspective. Since this project does not focus on the structural aspects of a musical material in terms of a musical score, but rather on actions conducted in and dependent on the performance context, methods of traditional music analysis are not used. The methods I use are explorative and divergent, and partly inspired by qualitative research.

The musical output in this project is not intended as works to be recorded and reproduced. Therefore, the documentation of the performances at hand are not to be considered as such. It is the social interactions on stage and with the audience that constitute the vital part of the project.

Classical and contemporary vocal improvisation (CCVI)

In my earlier studies and professional work, I became aware that the creative agency of classical singers in performance is affected by a number of unspoken norms, rules and habits. It seemed as if the classical genre affected us as performers in a way that differed very much from fellow singers in other genres, such as jazz or folk music. As described in the prologue above, I experienced that the musico-dramatic interactions between singers often seemed to come second to the individual delivery of vocal sound. I found that this was not so much related to singers as individuals, or classical music as material, but to how the work was structured between the actors in musical performance and production. The role classical singers have in these processes affects how we perceive ourselves and our individual creative potential. As a student in theatre improvisation, I had experienced how a focus on presence, group communication, creativity and acceptance between the participators gave an entirely

different experience of performance. Since then, I have searched for ways to develop modes and methods of classical and contemporary improvisation (CCVI), combining the experiences of classical singing with modes of creative group interaction.

CCVI is a practice where classically trained singers and musicians improvise music, text and dramatic action with the aim of communicating a musico-dramatic narrative through joint interaction. All performers presented in this project are trained as classical singers and classical musicians (composers) in Swedish music and opera academies. Throughout, I have collaborated with classical singers and musicians in the Swedish ensembles *Operaimprovisatörerna* (*The Opera Improvisers*, my translation, *OI*) and *Impromans*,³ in productions, performances, workshop sessions and interviews. I have also worked with both students and professional musicians, singers, improvisers and composers connected to the Academy of Music in Malmö and the Metropolia University of Applied Sciences in Helsinki.

In our performances and projects, we focus on means and techniques for creating music based on words, situated interaction and inner images, in a constant dialogue with the musical idioms of Western classical music traditions. We emphasise the development of joint techniques for communication, listening, as well as musical and dramatic action. In every specific situation, the emergent music is a consequence of musico-dramatic interactions in dialogue with traditions. This differs from the musico-dramatic interpretation of a musical score, where the work is interpreted and staged in accordance with the reading at hand.

All practices addressed in this project are based on the shared and individual musical experiences of the performers, in terms of embodied repertoire and performance knowledge of the opera improvisers. Thus, few performers in this project have a background in improvisation based on given musical patterns⁴ as is often the case in other fields, such as baroque improvisation, organ improvisation, folk music, jazz, and free improvisation. As no musico-dramatic material is decided upon beforehand, the performers' musical backgrounds and knowledge is the main input when the improvisations take shape during performance.

In the work, no material⁵ such as given texts, harmonic patterns or concrete outlines of actions in the scenes is prepared in advance. Rather, the improvising singers and

³ A duo consisting of me and the pianist Conny Antonov.

⁴ Improvising on given musical patterns is not a part of Western classical music performance in the conservatoire tradition (see Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a).

⁵ There are a few exceptions, such as the technique improvised cantata performed by OI, where the pianist often uses a known harmonic pattern, while the singers improvise melody, text and action.

musicians are inspired by a joint set of improvisational frames, or techniques that are based on communication, listening and dramatic interaction. Some of these can be described as musico-dramatic and performative idioms that derive from years of training and professional performance practice as singers and musicians in the field of classical repertoire.

I have divided the artistic methods into three parts: (i) opera improvisation, (ii) lyrical improvisation, and (iii) vocal improvisation in dialogue with other experimental methods (art, electronics, light). As a singer, I use similar techniques for creating 'vocal actions' (Bergström, 2000, p. 26)⁶ in my relation to the subject of the improvisation, when improvising in operatic, lyrical or other experimental formats and contexts. Throughout the text, I refer to the CCVI colleagues with their first names, whereas references to written sources are made with the writers' surnames. This aims to reflect the working relations as they are manifested in the practice of the project.

Opera improvisation

When we improvise operas, the audience is often invited to give suggestions for the starting points of the performance. This might be a place or a relation between persons. In the first scene of an improvised opera, a platform or milieu is created with one of a variety of techniques (see further below). For example, in a performance with OI, one of the singers might take on the role as a narrator and depict the place to the audience and the co-performers. S/he is accompanied by the pianist, who creates a musical atmosphere for the suggested place along with the singer's spoken performance and also establishes the musical style of the upcoming improvisation. After this, a series of scenes follow where the singers perform characters, relations, actions and intentions, in arias, recitatives and ensembles in constant musico-dramatic dialogue with each other. Much of our work is based on techniques and games that focus the development of techniques in interaction, communication, movement, dramaturgy and musical improvisation. These are often spontaneously applied in performance. Through the giving and taking of suggestions and impulses with a focus on the words and dramatic dialogues of the

In the project SM the singers improvise new melody, text and action on slightly rearranged classical works by composers such as Mozart, Puccini and Verdi. In the performance with Audio Activists some improvisations took the vantage point in poems by the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer.

⁶ This concept will be further explored and discussed below.

singers, a performance emerges. The mythos (the story of the opera) is shaped with conflicts, turning points and an ending.

During performance, the singers as well as the pianist work with interaction on many levels at the same time (Wilén 2013a). For example, these may include the fictional situation at hand, the emerging story, the musical and performative traditions, idioms and tropes (see below), each other as improvisers and the audience.⁷ As much of OI's work relates closely to *opera buffa* (see below) and modern improvisation theatre traditions, humour is often used as a tool for interacting and dealing with energy in the performance situation in relation to the audience, as well as a means for the singers to process their empowered position as compared to interpreting musical works. Humour can also be a central tool when the improvisers negotiate offers, roles and power distribution on stage during the emergent improvisations.

Lyrical improvisation

An improvised Lied performance, what I call an *impromans* (a pun combining the Swedish word, 'romans', meaning art song, with the word 'improvisation'), is more similar to a concert performance. I perform as a solo singer in dialogue with the pianist Conny Antonov. Departing from a word given by the audience, we improvise music and text inspired by our inner and shared images and dramatic situations emerging in our interactions. Our work is inspired by musical and performative styles of the art song repertoire and performance, mainly from the late 19th or early 20th centuries. In this work, musical qualities such as phrasing, timbre and dynamics are more central than in opera improvisation.

Vocal improvisation in dialogue with visual art, electronics and light

In a few experimental sessions and performances, I have investigated CCVI in dialogue with visual art, electronics and light together with fellow performers. In these, the performance context and the prerequisites of the art form set the frames for the improvisatory work. For me as a singer, each event has resulted in the discovery and development of new performance techniques and performative experiences expanding the vocal approaches of the classical singer.

⁷ This is discussed in four of the articles (Wilén 2013a, Wilén 2013b, Wilén 2015, Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication b) and will be addressed further below.

CCVI in context

In order to frame the work in this project, I will in this chapter contextualise opera improvisation in relation to improvisation in the Western music tradition and my own background as a classical singer. Since the practice of CCVI is strongly connected to improvisation, classical vocal performance, opera and modern theatre improvisation, by the use and play of techniques and approaches from these traditions and practices, it is adequate to start with an outline of the developments in these fields. The section contains a brief overview of conceptions and ideas of musical and vocal improvisation that I find vital in relation to the interactional processes in CCVI. It is followed by an overview of the roots of improvisation in Western classical vocal music,⁸ opera, modern theatre and opera improvisation. Research and literature in, on and through classical vocal performance and opera is also addressed. The final section describes my individual artistic background.

Improvisation as artistic practice: tradition, interaction and skills

Researchers have conceptualised the phenomenon of musical and vocal/oral improvisation in different ways. In the following, I will give a few examples of approaches that I find useful when investigating performative aspects of CCVI.⁹

Berkowitz (2010) notes that improvisation is a central part of all human activity and argues that the ability to improvise in a certain style derives from a deep knowledge of the musical elements, processes and forms of the style in question. These must be psychologically and physically internalised in the long-term memory, or automatised, in order to obtain spontaneous fluency. Many researchers share the conception of musical improvisation as a mode of varying and developing a shared notion of ideas and/or materials. In order for improvisers to express themselves

⁸ For a further discussion on improvisation in Western music history and literature, see Wilén (manuscript submitted for publication b).

⁹ As noted in *Delimitations* above, not all forms of musical improvisation are addressed here.

musically in relation to their artistic and traditional contexts, instrumental and musical skills play a vital role. Pressing (1987) notes that musical improvisation is a sort of skill and describes certain features that characterise all sorts of skill learning. During early stages, the improviser collects a basic vocabulary and basic perceptual differentiations are made. During intermediate stages, larger units of action are collected in order to connect the pre-existing vocabulary to the cognitive framework. At advanced and expert stages, the performer has access to different motion programmes that facilitate a great variety in the qualitative aspects, such as effectiveness, flexibility, efficiency and fluency. These are finely attuned due to the information perceived by the improviser, who can concentrate on the emerging parameters for expression control, such as timbre, form, articulation, texture, emotions, and dynamics.

Within the modern theatre improvisation genre¹⁰ - to which the practice of CCVI is related - a number of techniques for group listening, creativity, interaction, communication, situation based acting and dramaturgy have been developed. While variations and exercises based on these techniques are part of operatic performance training and theatrical actor training, learning to perform improvisations professionally demands a further development of these skills, where the ability for risk taking is a fundamental component. Vilc (2015) underlines the need of skills in modern improvisational theatre performance:

To those who are not familiar with this tradition, to go on an empty stage without any conception and still be able to produce a satisfying performance often seems like a terrifying, if not impossible, task. However, this perception of improvisation is based on the assumption that what its actors do onstage is completely unregulated and free. This is not the case. Theatre improvisation includes rules, principles and restrictions that professional improvisers spend years training in before they become second nature. Theatre improvisation is a technique, a craft to be learned. It is an art form like any other. (Vilc, 2015, p. 23)

Improvised performance can also be seen as a way of reflecting tradition as well as constructing the performer's artistic identity. In his widely read book on improvisation, Bailey (1992) describes idiomatic improvisation as the most common form, where idioms such as baroque, flamenco or jazz create modes of expression, identity and motivation. The tradition can be reflected in terms of addressing a joint set of ideas or materials common in a variety of styles. Sawyer (2003) suggests two different types of musical materials - modal models and ready-mades - and gives

¹⁰ See also the section *Action and situation in vocal stage performance* below.

jazz¹¹ and ragas as examples of the former, while Slavic epic poetry and Javanese gamelan represent the latter. The need for a formal structure as a musical starting point is pointed out by Soules (1994) who claims that freedom in jazz improvisation is based on the study of, and its relation to a musical tradition: 'The protocols of improvisation derived from the knowledge and study of the tradition provide a context for the greater freedom of spontaneous invention' (Soules, 2004, p. 277). According to Tandberg (2008), idiomatic musical improvisation can be described as a 'music making process which concerns itself with historic forms, but also to more modern methods of expression, which have in the course of time acquired their own peculiar forms' (Tandberg, 2008, p. 19).

In a study of organ improvisation, Johansson (2008) points out that written music can function as a source, or a language, from which organists draw their vocabulary. Correspondingly, the improvisatory practice facilitates an expansive approach to written music, which becomes a tool for creating music that suits the circumstances and needs in a certain context (*ibid.*). The improviser then makes use of artistic norms, values and choices on intuitive as well as conscious levels and relate to a certain performance tradition of genre and instrument, as well as to individual stances. Tandberg (2008) values that an improviser follows compositional rules, and argues that creating music should be delimited by formal structures: 'This is not about free and unstructured musical flights of fancy' (p. 19) but rather on concepts that are more or less clearly defined for instance based on different periods in history.

In many oral improvisational genres, tradition takes shape as a joint set of ideas, rather than as formal musical structures. Potter (1998) notes that an original function of improvising ornaments in Western vocal music was to enhance the ideas of the text (p. 34). Rosenberg (*in press*) underlines the importance of a singer's cognitive frames as point of departure in folk singing where improvisation plays a vital part. Rather than sticking to a fixed melody and varying its dynamics and tempo (as in art song performance), the melodic material is one of the factors that may be varied in performance. Rosenberg sees variation as an obvious expression in music. She gives multiple examples of renowned folk singers in different European traditions who consider other points of departure than notation. For example, phrases may be varied freely, which means relating to the song as a whole rather than as a number of given phrases. Songs may also be perceived as narratives or as inner images, rather than as a given musical material, and the context of the performance situation plays a vital role. Rosenberg's descriptions resemble those of Lord (2003), who investigated the traditions and techniques of oral epic tradition

¹¹ Sawyer notes that many jazz musicians work with a personal set of ready-mades, or licks.

in Yugoslavia in the 1930s, in search of vocal performance traditions with roots in ancient Greece. Lord underlines the vital importance of the performance situation in oral epic practice, claiming that this oral performance tradition has religious rather than artistic roots. Oral epic songs are never performed the same way twice, since there is no outlined melodic or verbal original in this fluid tradition. Instead, the songs are (re)created by the singing poets who perceive songs as narratives, based on a formula of phrases that is useful and frequently used (Lord, 2003, p. 65).

The theme, even though verbal, is not a fixed set of words, but a grouping of ideas (Lord, p. 69). Potter & Sorrell (2012) note that these singers 'create narrative through inserting relevant details into the appropriate formal structure' (p. 42), with the use of rhetorical means for keeping the listener's attention. This conception of music offers a refreshing contrast to Western classical repertoire performance, so firmly based in a literate tradition, where the concepts of author and original ideas in musical works form a naturalised part of performance and communication. In oral epic practice, this is far from the case. As Lord puts it: '... our concept of 'the original', of 'the song', simply makes no sense in oral tradition' (p. 101).

Group interaction

In ensemble improvisation such as jazz, group collaboration is a vital component in the creative process. Many scholars see the interactional processes as dependent on the individual contributions and choices of the musicians in relation to each other. For example, Bjerstedt (2014), in his study on the metaphor of storytelling in jazz, notes that qualities of wholeness, openness and listening are vital, as well as relating to notions of authenticity, tradition and authenticity relating to the musician's individuality and position in the jazz community. In her ethnomusicological study of jazz improvisation focusing on the interactional processes of the rhythm section, Monson (1996) explores structural similarities between jazz performance and conversation (p. 8). According to her, 'interacting musical roles are simultaneously interacting human personalities' (Monson, 1996, p. 7), and the characters of the musicians as individuals have a great impact on the emergent musical processes. The similarity between musical improvisation and oral communication is further investigated by Sawyer (2003), who talks about group creativity, referring to the practices of jazz musicians and actors in modern improvisation theatre. He argues that processes of interaction in improvisational ensembles can be understood through G. H. Mead's concept of the emergent: an improviser's contribution is instantly evaluated by the others and affects the emergent improvisation to a higher or lower degree.

To summarise, in musical and theatre improvisation alike, a joint set of points of departure, such as ideas, formulas, protocols or rules, is a common strategy. In order to outline how improvisation is and has been conceived in classical vocal and musical performance, a brief historical orientation will follow below.

The historical roots of Western musical improvisation

In my work as a professional singer, I have experienced that improvising classical singers as a phenomenon are fairly unknown. Still, although improvisation is quite uncommon in Western classical music performance today, it was a part of the vocal and instrumental performance practices before 1850 (Hultberg, 2000).¹² Music schools and treatises from the 17th and 18th centuries by musicians and teachers such as G. Caccini (1602), P. F. Tosi (1743, in Potter & Sorrell, 2012), M. Garcia (in Potter, 1998), C. P. E. Bach, L. Mozart and J. Quantz illustrate how improvisation was seen as a central tool for musicians and singers in live music performance.¹³ Singers and musicians on all levels expressed themselves through performance according to idiomatic features and structures and by making variations on conventional musical patterns.¹⁴ The singer's creativity was important in order to create elaborations in the score (Potter & Sorrell, 2012). Opera singers of the 17th until the early 19th century are often described as musical virtuosos, inspiring composers to include vocal ornamentations in their scores (Potter, 1988). They were educated in composition and acquired fame as stars (Somerset-Ward, 2004).

What was most important was the additional and unique material that the singer would add to the composer's blueprint... From the audience's point of view the singing was far more important than the music it was the singer who moved listeners, not the composer. To do this, the singer needed to be in complete control of his or her instrument, and to have a repertoire of models or formulae from which new material could be derived instantaneously mid-performance. (Potter & Sorrell, 2012, p. 93)

Some scholars emphasise that the singers' own musical virtuosity often took over in operatic performance (Hedwall, 2006), which was seen as affecting their dramatic

¹² See also Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a.

¹³ For vocal history investigating the prerequisites of singing in a global context, see Potter & Sorrell (2012).

¹⁴ As discussed in Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication b, poetic vocal improvisation in verse or in prose, often with instrumental accompaniment, had a peak in Italy during the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries.

role performance negatively (Cone, 1974; Somerset-Ward, 2004). This prompted composers - such as, for instance, Gluck and Mozart - to write operas that were musico-dramatic entities, with a delimited scope for the singers' improvisations (Bergström, 2000). After 1800, female opera singers dominated the opera stage, especially in the *bel canto* repertoire. Vocal melodic improvisations were still common in opera (Damoureau, 1997), although in musical structures that focused more on the dramatic action and the orchestral parts than earlier (Somerset-Ward, 2004).

During the early 19th century, a clearer distinction developed between performing notated music and improvisation (Goehr, 2007), where a 'work-concept' (p. 4) of music emanated. By the second half of the 19th century, the composed, musical work was central in Western performance practice (Citron, 2000; Goehr, 2007). Performers were expected to interpret the composer's score in accordance with a new hierarchy where the composer and the conductor held higher positions than the singers and instrumentalists.¹⁵ However, this development has ancient roots. According to Potter (1998), parts of the present day musical ideology, separating the roles of composer and performer, derives from literate societies (p. 9) such as ancient Greece. Potter (1998) examines ideologies and artistic prerequisites of singing, and claims that, throughout history, stylistic renewal in singing has been driven by a focus on delivering the text. Since free men engaged in music as a philosophical and academic discipline while the performers often were slaves, a clear distinction in status developed between theoretical and practical (performance) aspects of music, where performers had a low social (and artistic) status in society as compared to the poets and academics. Potter notes that the term 'classical singing' was introduced by the growing bourgeoisie in the 19th century as a way to elevate this form as elite (and commodity) above other singing styles, symbolizing high taste with roots in an aristocratic classical heritage. Improvisation declined during the 19th century in the performance practice of singers and musicians, except with organists, (Bailey, 1990, Johansson 2008). This transition shows parallels to Potter's three stage model of cyclic change in vocal performance development. In the development stage, one particular style achieves a hegemonic position due to a new mode of delivering text: 'In all historical moments the most significant change to occur is invariably related to the nature of performance rhetoric, the ability of a singer to invest a text with particular meanings' (Potter, 1998, p. 194). In the second, decadent stage, a virtuosity of vocal display has overshadowed the text as prior

¹⁵ For a discussion on deconstruction of the relations between author and performer, see Wilén 2013b.

consideration (p. 197) and may appear as ‘an indulgence in display for its own sake’ (p. 51) as in operas by Handel and Rossini.

It is interesting to note that the musical development of vocal improvisation in opera was considered as problematic in relation to the intentions of some composers, and set in contrast to dramatic role performance. Somerset-Ward (2004) notes that singers in the 18th century were seen as co-creators, at the same time arguing that the problem of *bel canto* was that this vocal method shadowed the intention of opera, that is, the creation of drama through music. Potter & Sorrell (2012) describe a collaborative compositional process, where the roles between composer and performer were blurred. However, the performers played the most significant role, since the audience came for the singers, not the music:

From the audience’s point of view the singing was far more important than the music; it was the singer who moved listeners, not the composer. To do this, the singer needed to be in complete control of his or her instrument, and to have a repertoire of models of formulae from which new material could be derived instantaneously mid-performance. (Ibid, p. 93)

As noted above, this was later followed by a renewal, such as the dramatic singing and performance of Verdi’s music, focusing on a dramatic presentation of the operatic text (ibid.). Thus, composers such as Verdi fought against, and finally defeated ‘the deeply ingrained belief that ‘Italian opera was defined... as a style of singing - ‘beautiful singing’, with its undramatic (some would say anti-dramatic) connotations’ (Somerset-Ward, 2004, p. xi) instead of a form of theatre or drama.

Today, few Western higher music education institutions offer education in improvisation for classical singers and musicians, apart from in baroque music and free improvisation, inspired by Modernist music aesthetics. Instead, most classical singers are trained in interpreting scores of famous musical works of the classical/art music canon.¹⁶ Improvisation in dialogue with the musical and opera repertoire and performance traditions created after the baroque era and before 20th century Modernism is even more seldom addressed in the common practice of the classical singers of today. The influence and effects of the work concept on the performance practice and education of classical singers have been overlooked, and are vital areas for future research.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the work role of the Western classical singer today, please see Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication b.

Development of modern theatre and opera improvisation

The Italian *commedia dell'arte* tradition forms a vital part of the Western theatre improvisation history,¹⁷ with roots in the Renaissance (Vilc, 2015). The *commedia* improvisations were based on a set of characters with contrasting functions and sometimes outset plotlines, in close dialogue with the audience. The actors performed the same characters throughout the years. Even in Elizabethan theatre, where all performed material was censored, improvisation was allowed for fools and clowns (ibid.).

Modern theatre and drama improvisation as it is mostly performed in Sweden draws on traditions developed in Great Britain, by Keith Johnstone (1985), and USA, by Viola Spolin (1963/1999). Spolin, ‘the mother of modern improvisational theatre’ (Vilc, 2015, p. 45, writer’s quotes), developed her concept of improvisational techniques in Chicago in the 1930s as a method for young actors to cope with stage fright. The concept of theatre games was developed as a result of teaching drama in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Spolin’s techniques were inspired by sociologist Neva Boyd and were further developed by her son Paul Sills, who founded the first modern improvisation theatre company, *The Compass* (Vilc, 2015).

Keith Johnstone (1985) started developing his methods of creativity as a primary school teacher and later head of the playwright department at the Royal Court Theatre¹⁸ (RCT). He also led the Writers Group, where writers evaluated and developed scripts through the use of practical improvisation. As a teacher at the RCT and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, he started the first British improvisation group (Vilc, 2015), *The Theatre Machine*, before he settled as professor at the University of Calgary, touring over the world as teacher and director. The Swedish director Suzanne Osten introduced Johnstone and his work at *Klarateatern* in Stockholm in the 1980’s (Osten, 1988), where the most prominent theatre institutions were invited to challenge each other in theatre sports, leading to a great popularity of the genre. Today, there are many professional modern theatre improvisation ensembles in Sweden (see for instance *Ad Lib*, *Stockholms Improvisationsteater*, *Unghästen*).

¹⁷ For a further outline of Western vocal improvisation history, see Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication b.

¹⁸ During this period, Johnstone studied the writings of the Russian actor and theatre director Yevgey Vakhtangov, who was a student of Konstantiv Stanislavskij. Vakhtangov developed the concept of realistic acting with a stylised physical approach into a set of exercises, used only as a method for rehearsals and training (Vilc, 2015).

Opera improvisation, as an art form and as a pedagogical tool (where improvisation is sometimes combined with notated material) appeared internationally about 30 years ago, in USA (*Play it by Ear*, *Opera Works*, *Opera Columbus*), Great Britain (*Impropera*), and later in Finland (*Improah!*), and Sweden (Vadstena-Akademien/*Opera på Studs*, *Operaimprovisatörerna*, *Impromans*, *Operation Opera*). *Opera Works* was founded by the pianist Ann Baltz in 1987. It is featured as a platform for training programs for singers, combining operatic improvisation with techniques for stage performance, repertoire work and opera production. In their digital material, opera improvisation is presented as a creative tool for singers in their artistic role on the opera market, and as part of opera productions featuring repertoire pieces, sometimes in dialogue with modern dance (Operaworks, nd.). Rhoda Levine developed her opera improvisation methods as teacher at the Juilliard School of Music. The ensemble *Play it by Ear* with Levine as director was founded in New York in 1994, performing for example to young audiences from problematic socio-economic backgrounds (Pauli, 2003). *Impropera* was founded in 1994 and make public performances and in site performances in museums, academic venues as well as workshops. The ensemble performs opera improvisation with song and different combinations of instruments: piano, clarinet, flute and violin, and highlights their performances as entertainment: 'Serious music meets surreal comedy' (Impropera, n.p., n.d.). I have not found any research done in relation to these ensembles. They are not further part of my project, since I focus mainly on CCVI in the contexts where I am engaged as performer, researcher and/or teacher.

Impromans

This duo, consisting of Sara Wilén, singer and Conny Antonov, piano, was founded in 2009 as one of few ensembles in the world improvising in *Lied* styles- *Impromans* has performed in a series of lecture recitals and performances in festivals, concert series, in Sweden and abroad, as well as on Swedish radio. The duo has taught opera improvisation at Malmö Academy of Music since 2005, and leads workshops both in Sweden and abroad.

Operaimprovisatörerna

Operaimprovisatörerna (the Opera Improvisers, my translation) was founded in 2007 and consists of the opera singers Mette Af Klint, Sara Wilén, Alexandra Orrgård Solén, Fredrik af Klint, Linus Flogell, Samuel Jarrick, David Hornwall and Gregor Bergman (pianist). The ensemble has produced 15 performance productions along with some hundred performances in festivals, theatres, media, schools, corporate contexts and other. Almost all of the material is improvised live, both music, text

and dramatic action. The responsibility of creating these performative strategies is distributed, so that all the singers (and the pianist from a musico-dramatic point of view) share the same responsibilities and possibilities in shaping the emerging improvisations. In all the performances, the dialogue with the audience is central, since they are invited as co-creators, giving suggestions during the performance through various technical and communicational solutions. Creating the performative framework of the performance, with respect to the artistic goals of the production at hand and the audience reactions is a line of constant negotiation within the ensemble, both during rehearsals and preparations and in play during the live performances. As the stage light is also improvised during the productions, the dramatic interaction with the light designer is crucial in the emerging improvisations.

The first years were focused on creating performance concepts investigating the new artistic format of operatic improvisation, developing techniques of dramaturgy, musical and dramatic stage improvisation inspired by tonal languages and styles from the Western classical/art song repertoire. In developing new concepts and techniques, the ensemble has also worked with directors and coaches from modern improvisation theatre such as Per Gottfredsson, Sofia Jonsson and Camilla Persson, as well as the opera director Elisabet Ljungar. The members of the group are all classically trained singers and musicians. Their audience is often mixed, with children, youngsters, adults and elderly people. The production formats vary with regard to improvisational techniques, incitements, themes, musical content and stage performance. Every performance is unique when it comes to dramatic, musical and textual contents, since the ensemble always asks the audience for specific incitements for the scenes. The activities of the ensemble focus on three main areas: public performances, school performances/pedagogical activities, and performance engagements for organizations.

I have not found any other research made in this field, and to my knowledge, the companies discussed above work mainly in the fields of performance and education. From what I have found, these ensembles focus their work mainly on their local and national contexts. Until now there has not been much international collaboration, as has been the case in modern theatre improvisation, where there is a great number of international festivals and other collaborations.

Relations between music, text and action in opera

As CCVI actors, our artistic roles differ from the role of the classical singer. The most vital difference is that a CCVI actor is both performer and author (even though the authorship is shared in the ensemble). As we are influenced by our classical heritage and make many of our choices on an intuitive level coloured by years of training, it is vital to know more about the prerequisites of this heritage. I have chosen to focus mainly on opera and classical vocal performance, in order to delineate how relations between music, text and action in CCVI performance are constructed.

Opera is a complex phenomenon in European cultural history, situated as it is between a modern conception of the world and ancient traditions. Wendy Heller (2014) summarises this complexity in the following way:

Opera history, for better or worse, is in many respects a victim of its own mythology: a genre born of noble parents in a noble setting, arising from the desire of elite Florentine intellectuals, themselves inspired by humanistic fervor, to create a form of music that emulated the expressive power of Greek tragedy. (p. 278)

Consequently, opera has been described in different ways by different actors in the opera field through history. In the following I will give some examples of how opera as a concept is coloured by various ways of approaching the relation between music, text, action and performance.

In 'Opera, a concise history' (Orrey, 1987), opera is described as part of theatre, characterised by dialogue and dramatic confrontation, which is intensified by music on stage and in the orchestra (p. 7). Sjöberg (1992), on the other hand, argues that opera is a musical form where the musical composition shapes the expressional aspects of the text and the dramatic interaction. Music has a 'tyrannical power' (p. 21, *tyrannisk makt*, my translation) that cannot be changed by a certain interpretation in performance. He states that the text is primarily functional, providing the composer with material for storytelling through music. Furthermore, the music should not mirror the text, but rather investigate its darker depths (*ibid.*, p. 165). He is supported by Dahlhaus (1989) who points out that the musical form, and the way it presents dramatic events, should be used as a vantage point: 'The story underlying an opera does not exist independently of the music; and the story in the libretto as such is not the story of the opera as a musical drama' (p. 101). The

contradictory attitudes towards action and music reflected above have ancient roots, which affect how classical vocal performance in relation to dramatic action is performed and perceived, both by performers and audience. Aristotle and Plato represent diametrically opposed approaches to what music and action are and how they should be applied, which have coloured the development of vocal classical genres until today.

Plato was supporter of the doctrine of ethos, which is based on the notion that certain melodic movements and keys have qualities which are created within the listener's soul and therefore must be regulated (Benestad, 1994). Plato's view on music as representing a static image of the unchanging cosmic principles, apart from human emotions and conflicts, had an immense influence on the development of music education and church music until the Renaissance (ibid). Aristotle (1961), on the other hand, states that the emergence of poetry, art, comedy and tragedy derive from human nature's vital devotion to imitate nature in order to achieve knowledge. He considered imitation (*mimesis*), originally manifested in improvisation, as a way of acquiring human knowledge and pleasure. Aristotle outlines the difference between tragedy and comedy as dramatic forms. The former aims to represent noble humans and their actions, and the latter (the simpler actions of) human beings inferior to (the free) man in society. Tragedy is constituted by a series of actions which will evoke empathy and fear as purification of the action (p. 30). The order of the events creates a *peripeteia*, a sudden change from ignorance to knowing, and a new experience of the relations on stage, as well as *pathos*, the emotional element (p. 40). As indicated by the views on music outlined in the writings of Plato and Aristotle above, qualities of music and theatrical action (in terms of both material and performance) are seen to highly affect the audience.

Representing outer actions through music

Bergström (2000) claims that opera became a way for Renaissance humanists to investigate a view of the human being, where contrasting emotions and forces were situated inside the individual. A central notion, inspired by Aristotle, was music as an imitation of speech, conveying passion and thought. Composers such as Vincenzo Galilei studied how ordinary people spoke and expressed themselves in gestures and emotions, in order to portray human life as a sort of mimesis, rather than using musical techniques founded on mathematical structures (ibid). From the work of Florentina Camerata¹⁹ developed the idea of recitatives with a solo vocal

¹⁹ A group including composers such as Vincenzo Galilei, Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini.

part in a free, declamatory style, with a plain instrumental accompaniment (Orrey, 1987). Galilei also recommended that composers study actors' performance of monologues and how they used their voices differently depending on the affect (Benestad, 1994). In his discussion of action in relation to music, Small (1988) also describes theatre as central in art music development in Western culture. Composers such as Monteverdi, Caccini and Cavalli, developed systematic vocabularies of how sounds and musical gestures express emotional states and personal characteristics (temperaments) in the early 17th century. The aim was 'to place these gestures together in time in order to represent developing relationships between the characters whom the singers, now become actors as well, were impersonating on stage' (p. 147). The performance of these musical gestures on stage gradually established the vocabularies as separate systems even if they still carried the same meanings within the musical structures.

I find these approaches highly relevant, although I would prefer to speak in terms of vocal and musical actions rather than of gestures, in order to describe these relationships. Also, I hold it quite probable that the first composers of opera were not merely inventing these (performative) systems themselves without relating to the flourishing improvisational culture in Italy, where poets, actors and singers were using instrumental accompaniments in extemporised performances (Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication b). My argument is based on a similar development described by Kern (1988) where opera composers such as Galuppi and Mozart based some of their works on techniques from *opera buffa* (comic opera) a popular form of music drama farce deriving from Naples with roots in *commedia dell'arte*.

In *opera buffa* as well as in *commedia dell'arte*, vocal and instrumental improvisation was a vital part of performance. Kerman describes how Mozart developed the genre of *opera buffa* further in some of his most renowned master pieces: *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*. Some of the main characteristics of the genre were swift shifts in dynamics, a focus on the vocal delivery of words to achieve lively characterizations, and wit.

It formed a distinct tradition, much humbler than the solemn court opera of Metastasio, bawdy, swift, lifelike, preposterous, with firm if mysterious roots in the *commedia dell'arte*. *Opera buffa* required singing actors rather than expensive *virtuosi*; its composers were often the less distinguished; it fed on the *opera seria*, parodied it constantly, and made its own aesthetic discoveries. Of these the most important was a new feasible relationship between action and music. This discovery, which made possible the dramatic accomplishment

of Mozart, was one of the most striking single developments in the history of opera. (Kerman, 1988, pp. 58-59, writer's italics)

This focus on character-driven drama that emphasises the words rather than the musical virtuosity of the performers goes well in hand with the view on development in Western vocal genres presented by Potter (1998). As noted above, such stages of a genre development have been followed by stylistic development towards virtuosity, 'eventually reaching a plateau beyond which further evolution is not possible until another text-related change is triggered' (Potter, 1998, p. xiii).

In the classical *opera buffa* by Mozart, the recitativo secco²⁰ was kept as a reminiscence of *opera seria* (Kerman, 1988, p. 73) and it was in the recitatives that most of the action took place. According to Kerman, the elements of *opera buffa* prepared the ground for a new way of creating music, as a part of the development from the baroque style of Metastasio and Bach to the classical style of Mozart and Beethoven. The new style offered more variations in dynamics, tempo, and a possibility to join elements of contrast:

...abrupt changes of feeling were at first juxtaposed, then justified and developed until a final resolution lay at hand. Music in a word became psychologically complex. Conflict, passage, excitement, and flux, could be handled within a single musical continuity... (Kerman, 1988, p. 59)

Characters in the commedia tradition display similarities with characters in opera, such as the heroic tenor, the tragic dramatic soprano, the clever soubrette maid servant, the passionate mezzo soprano and the powerful bass. Categorizing voices as dramatic and musical characters is an established part of the Western classical vocal tradition, with the *Fach* system where a certain voice and body type is associated with a certain musical, dramatic or comical character and repertoire even today (Cotton, 2007, Wilén, 2013b). This is another example of how the performance tradition of the improvising commedia characters with roots in Italian renaissance has bearings on today's opera and classical vocal education and performance.

Smart (2004) argues that music can play a vital role in conducting, or directing the attention of viewers, providing them with different perspectives:

In less literal contexts, music can operate on a more delicate level of gestural meaning, pinning itself to a particular character or sequence of movements in order

²⁰ In recitativo secco, 'dry recitative', the accompaniment is harpsichord, as compared to *recitativo arioso*, or aria recitative, which is accompanied by the orchestra.

to guide the spectator's attention, sending us signals about where to look or what to feel while looking at a body on stage. This music can swim around performing bodies; it can even seem to sing through them. (Smart, 2004, p. 6)

In popular genres such as film, music can have a direct relation to action, guiding the viewer. It fills important functions, both as transmitting action in the course of events, and as influencing how spectators perceive actions. Music can have a director's function, marking both a change of perspective and explain a continuous (and in a narrative sense non-logical) shift between different points of view (Gorbman, 1993, p. 421).

This function of music shows similarities to how music works in opera improvisation, as will be presented in the analyses further below.

Musical structure as inner action

Even though physical and vocal actions and deliverance of text are regarded as central in vocal performance such as opera, many claim that music with looser relation to physical action is considered as more qualitative. Dahlhaus (1989) takes a musico-structural stance, stating that portraying (static) character rather than dramatic dialogue is the most important element of creating opera (apart from in Wagner's music). He argues that opera, which to a great extent consists of prolonged lyrical moments and arias, lacks strong teleological traits of dramatic action. Instead the dramatic processes are manifested in the music as evident tensions in relation to a basic structure. If we see the arias in such an opera as linked and relating to each other, a whole act in the Mozart opera seria *Idomeneo* could be seen as one single situation, where the relations appear in different lights, and the course of events, or the story is of minor importance.

Smart (2004) describes how the conventions of melodrama prevailed in opera into the 19th century. At the same time, there was a movement among composers from the mimetic aesthetics towards 'less physically concrete connections between music and staging' (Smart, 2004, p. 30), finding ways of expressing merely musical presence, negating the physical actions (ibid., p. 150). In the opera *Tristan and Isolde* by Wagner, the action evolves on several parallel layers. External moments of action that take place in real time are interfoliated with subjective time, extending the moment (Kroó, 2000, p. 784) in a labyrinth of psychological reflections and emotional events, driven by the omniscient orchestra (ibid.). Smart claims that opera critics in general tend to regard pictorialism in vocal music as a 'surface effect' (Smart, 2004, p. 8), whereas music that shows 'much looser, less overt, more idea-driven

relationships between music and staging' (p. 8) is considered more aesthetically high-ranking. This can be seen as an effect of the higher aesthetic status given to instrumental music in the later part of the 19th century (Wilén, under consideration, b).

This aesthetic point of departure seems to be present in opera composition even today. Forssell (2015) relates to Aristotle's tripartite dramaturgical model of a beginning, middle and an end. Although he states that music should always relate to and not dominate action, Forssell emphasises the aesthetic necessity to finely tune the relations between mimetic aspects of the music and stage events when taking on the tricky task of composing 'music to action' (musik till handling, Gefors, 2011. p. 71, my translation). The music can initiate, accompany, underline, deepen and differentiate emotions and actions, but the threat of ending up merely *illustrating* these actions through music creates an artistic conflict that contemporary opera composers continuously must consider. (ibid.).

In opera and lyrical improvisation, the music is a vital part of the action, since the improvisers do communicate by means of the music. It should be noted that music which may appear as mere illustrating action in the dramatic situations, in these improvisational practices, often also has a vital performative function in the interplay between the improvisers since they are 'negotiating' the emergent dramatic development. As in film, this also helps to guide the viewer to the focus of attention. Thus, both mimetic and more abstract improvised music have performative functions as communicative tools in the improvisational interplay on many levels, as will be further investigated below.

Research on and in vocal performance

During the past two centuries, the Western classical music performance field has been dominated by the practice of the interpretation of scores in accordance with values connected to the work concept (Citron, 2000; Goehr, 2007; Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a; Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication b). Small (1988) had a great impact on the discussion, with the claim that music should be seen as an activity rather than an object. He claimed that 'music is first and foremost action' (p. 9) and that the acts of 'musicking' (p. 1) are established in relationships between all agents in the process, where the meaning of music is created. Small describes the predominant Western view on music as an independent object, or work, instead of actions of performing and listening, as a consequence of the 'trap of reification' (ibid, p. 2) in Western music, dating back to

Plato. Small criticises this view for giving performers a low status in the process of music making, and for depriving them of agency and of the right to be creative:

The part played by the performers in that perception does not come into consideration; when performance is discussed at all, it is spoken of as if it were nothing more than a presentation, and generally an approximate and imperfect presentation at that, of the work that is being performed. It is rare indeed to find the act of musical performance thought of as possessing, much less, creating, meanings in its own right. (Small, 1998, p. 4)

As also noted by Abbate in a text from 1992 (n.d.),²¹ opera analysis has been closely associated with musical analysis in musicology (Wilén 2013b, Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication b). This means that the main focus has been on musical aspects, leaving text, dramatic action and other visual aspects aside. Hence, even though they are a central part of experiencing opera, performative aspects of vocal performance are still missed out in the analyses.

In a later work, Abbate (2004) advocates new and more inclusive forms of musical analysis that take the actual experience into account, claiming that it is high time for analysts to stop falling prey to ‘coercive mysticism and morbid grandiloquence’ (Abbate, 2004, p. 535) by denying the material aspects of live music performance. Although her focus is on opera, parallels may be drawn to other kinds of live vocal performance in the classical music context, where structural or instrumental qualities are the subject of analysis rather than vocal, visual and verbal (i.e. performative) aspects.

Abbate is not alone in this call for an understanding of what she calls ‘operatic music’. A more inclusive and holistic perspective drawing on performative qualities, could take aspects of the singers’ performance more into account. In a study of literature on music in performance, Potter (1998) concludes that the classical field shows a significant lack of performance analysis, and calls for an ‘anti-musicology’ (p. 160) ideally conducted by the performer. In the last decades, a growing interest in performance analysis among musicologists has started to emerge, as noted by Bowen (1996). Still, much performative research in vocal²² music has maintained a focus on semiotic and visual aspects of the musical score (Clement, 1997; Ethnerson, 2005, 2008; McClary, 2002) rather than on the pragmatic,

²¹ See also Wilén, 2013b, Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication b.

²² In research conducted by instrumentalist-researchers, many choose to focus musical instrumental performance in terms of musical gestures. As my research focuses vocal based performance where communication occur through vocal utterances and social actions, music research focusing gestures as embodied practice of a physical (not vocal) instrument is not addressed in this project.

communicative and performative aspects of vocal performance as source of musical creation (Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a). Hutcheon & Hutcheon (2000) focus on scores literature and their own experiences of performances in their examination of the operatic body, taking the textual storylines and their often mythologised characters of famous opera history from 1600 and onwards, as points of departure for their literary analysis. In her overview of research in music in the fields of musicology and sociology, McCormick (2015) calls for a musical synthesis of the two research fields in order to better approach social processes of musical performance. However, during the last couple of years, Australian music researchers have focused on performativity (Davidson, 2014; Kartomi, 2014) and suggested further studies of relations between performers, their socio-cultural environments, embodied knowledge and factors of music communication and production.

As this brief orientation indicates, the main point of suture in opera and vocal music performance analysis is how the relation between music and performance action(s) is perceived and taken into account. For obvious reasons, models taking the collaborative aspects and the interaction between performers into account are a necessary analytical perspective in the present project. In this work, I have considered Sawyer's (1996) disagreement with the use of structural models for analyses of group improvisation as they do not take the inherent social structures into account. He argues that improvisation is contingent; every moment derives from the primary flow, but is at the same time an unpredictable, collective process, where several individuals continuously influence each other.

Singers as researchers in vocal performance

Apart from the rich flora of biographies by classical vocal performers, there are many singers who have contributed initiated pieces of writing in the area of classical singing and opera, such as Fleming (2004), Hemsley (1998) and Hines (1982), in his book containing 40 interviews with representatives of the world's most famous singers, such as Franco Corelli, Marilyn Horne, Birgit Nilsson and Luciano Pavarotti.

In vocal research, a growing interest in problematizing the artistic role of the classical singer and the field of vocal classical performance can be seen among singers and singing researchers. As noted above, singer and researcher John Potter (1998) investigates aesthetics and ideologies in western classical and popular singing practices, with a historical trajectory from ancient Greece until the late 1990's. Singer and composer Sven Kristersson (2010) explores aspects of narration, translation and composition, expanding the artistic role of the singer as performer on the concert stage. Kristersson investigates the metaphor of the Orpheus myth in

order to articulate the artist's 'knowing-in-action' (Kristersson, 2010, p. 354). Singer and composer Carl Unander Scharin (2014) develops interactive electronics in order to widen the professional role and musical agency of the classical singer. Inspired by queer and gender theory, singer, writer and music journalist Katarina A. Karlsson (2011) investigated the potentials of humour and queerness in songs by the Renaissance composer Thomas Campion, with the aim to explore socio-musical aspects of historical and contemporary musical performance.

In her artistic research on monodrama as solo singer performance, opera singer and musicologist Francesca Placanica explores ways of embodying dramatic action and multimodality in order to develop the classical singer's agency (forthcoming). Her other research focus lies on the experimental avant-garde performer Catherine Berberian's groundbreaking work as performer and composer (2014). In her recital performances, Berberian²³ challenged and parodied the role of the classical singer and the opera diva by dressing up and playfully acting with this image.' In doing so, she played with standard gender perceptions of the female opera singer held by the concert-goers, persisting the male gaze' (Karantonis & Verstratete, 2015, p. 9). Elisabet Belgrano (2011) investigates processes of vocal interpretation and the portrayal of Italian and French 17th century opera, focusing on the concept of pure voice in relation to female madness on stage. In her dissertation project (ongoing), Swedish opera singer Tove Dahlberg explores norms of gender and voice categorization in opera. The Swedish indie opera singer and designer Hedvig Jalhed explores alternative performative operatic formats and concepts that challenge traditional opera aesthetics, functions and framings in musico-dramatic role play as an art form in her artistic doctoral project (ongoing).

The aim of SIA is to research music as a collaborative, creative processes, and to investigate how these can be carried out in dynamic group performance contexts, with or without audience. As discussed above, there is not much previous research within this area. It is obvious that vocal-based musico-communicative processes are affected by a number of situational and discursive aspects (as is described, portrayed and discussed in this dissertation) and that they have a lot in common with other human communicative processes. Therefore, research in other areas such as gender studies, social sciences and linguistics have been considered relevant for this project. These perspectives will be further discussed in the section Theoretical approach.

²³ 'À la recherche de la musique perdue', 1974.

Choir, solo and improvisation – my musical background

Early on, as a student at Adolf Fredriks Musikskola I began to sing in choirs, and after graduation I sang the first soprano part in a number of established choirs in Stockholm and was often given solo assignments. Singing in professional choirs, with its constant flow of repertoire and narrow production time frames, is a challenge in many ways. Above all, it is vital to sing rhythmically and tonally correct, since most compositions are based on a joint pulse, intonation and precision and do not allow for anything that is not notated in the score. The choral vocal technique aims at letting individual singers melt into the collective sonic entity of the ensemble. Intonation is of utmost importance, and the personal timbre is supposed to mix with the other voices, in order to enrich the joint part without dominating the sound.

The high soprano parts are often placed in a high tessitura (range), where the Swedish choral sound ideal (emanating from the ideals of choral director Eric Ericson) is coloured by light soprano voices. Gradually, it became harder for me to unite this idiom with my voice, as it expanded towards a more personal timbre. At the same time, it became more central for me to make individual interpretations of the texts. This created a conflict that became evident in works where I participated both as a soloist and a chorister. I perceived a tension, or stage anxiety, in the choir parts, rather than in the solo parts. I realised that this was due to the fact that I constantly had to prevent an inner impulse to investigate and express the musical intentions that emanated in my encounter with the music, the words, the colleagues and the audience in the choir parts. This was not a way of disagreeing with the musical contents, rather it corresponded to my constant urge to find a personal interpretation of the music.

After preparatory singing studies in folk high schools, and Operastudio 67 in Stockholm, I took a master's degree in the vocal studies performance programme in 2003 at Malmö Academy of Music. As an opera singer I have performed traditional opera roles in music by Verdi, Mozart and Rossini as well as in contemporary operas²⁴, in productions at institutions such as NorrlandsOperan, Operaverkstan/the Malmö Opera and Riksteatern. Through the years I have performed as a soloist in a number of classical oratorios and orchestral works and

²⁴ Traditional roles include Violetta in *La Traviata* (Verdi), Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte*, Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* and Pamina in *The Magic Flute* (all Mozart), Berta in *The Barber of Seville* (Rossini) Contemporary roles include for instance Petra in *The Ballad of Kasper Red as a Rose* (Weiss/Björclin), Jenny in *Three Sisters who are not Sisters* (Rorem) and Hönan in *Stadsmusikanterna* (Forssell).

contemporary music. I have also worked with a broad chamber music repertoire in music²⁵ including Lieder and works for voice and various instruments.

To me, working with vocal repertoire shows similarities to solving crosswords: the challenge concerns making small parts correlate with the image as a whole with regard to various perspectives, while at the same time finding ways of singing and interpreting the music that are both clear and which allows space for action in the performance situation and context. Bergström (2000) describes how breathing is connected to thinking. A phrase is the physical line of a thought, where certain thoughts are short and demand little air, while others are complex and demand deep breaths and long vocal lines. As a consequence of that, Bergström suggests that the singer should 'start to think and feel within the pulse, so that each break affects him or her' (Bergström, 2000, p. 85) in the work with the musical punctuation, when interpreting the vocal part. I see this as ways of listening on different levels: becoming aware of harmonic progress and opening up for interaction in the moment, within the framework of the composition. I search for reasons and motives for the things that I sing in the moment, striving to keep open access to a 'not-knowing', in order to make space for different alternatives.

Apart from some excursions into jazz and pop performance in my early years, I first came in contact with musico-dramatic improvisation in the middle of the 1990s, as I took part of Per Gottfredsson's ²⁶ courses in improvisational theatre and improvised musical theatre at the music programme at Birkagårdens Folkhögskola, where classical singers (no instrumentalists from this genre 'dared' to join) worked together with singers and pianists from the jazz department.

As an opera and song improviser I have performed in various contexts all around Sweden throughout the years. In 2005 Malmö Opera/Operaverkstan worked with improvised opera in collaboration with the ensemble Improvisationsoperan in Malmö (IO), where I was a founding member, conducting performances at Operaverkstan combined with school performances in Lund. In 2007 I participated in founding the ensembles Operaimprovisatörerna and Impromans (see above). Together with Conny Antonov I have taught opera improvisation at the vocal studies performance programme at the Malmö Academy of Music since 2005, where we conducted an artistic development project in opera improvisation

²⁵ Among others Dowland, Webern, Wolf, Strauss, Schönberg, Debussy, Karpen, Pisati, Sersam, Perini and del Nero.

²⁶ Per Gottfredsson is one of Sweden's most prominent theatre improvisers, working as actor, director and pedagogue both in Sweden and abroad. He is a founding member of Stockholms Improvisationsteater (SIT).

(Antonov, Håkansson & Wilén, 2009). I also hold opera improvisation workshops and courses in Sweden and abroad.

Artistic methods

In this section I give an image of my practice as opera improviser. The first and second examples are taken from the practice of Operaimprovisatörerna, the third example from Impromans, and the last example from a project called *Vernissage*.

The following principles (inspired by Vilc, 2015, p. 27-28), common in modern theatre improvisation, are used in all four examples.

1. Accept your own spontaneous impulses.
2. Accept the impulses of your fellow improvisers.
3. Continue the music and action by relating and reacting to what is happening.
4. Develop the emergent material by connecting elements that have been established earlier.

Each example is framed by written information about the performance venue and a description of improvisatory techniques used by the ensembles. A link to a video recording²⁷ is presented along with an outline of the improvisation in a table, with columns for the time line, a description of events and the words. The descriptions vary, depending on if the performances relate to a classical vocal opera or concert approach. As will be discussed further below, I see these two approaches as distinct with regard to the production and perception of vocal performance, how singers perceive and use their physical bodies on stage, and how these are interpreted by the audience. In other words, the opera and the concert as performative discourses give the singers two different sets of performative tools. The tools used in improvisation are similar to those used in repertoire performances of opera and concert.²⁸

The opera format is used in examples 1 and 2. In the opera format, the singers perform staged action in a music drama by using their bodies as expressive visual

²⁷ The improvisations are documented on video, in example 1 with mixed cameras and in examples 2-4 with one camera.

²⁸ The differences between CCVI and repertoire performance to the singers form the topic of this dissertation. It will be discussed further below and in the articles 1-5.

tools, *carrying meaning*. For instance, in the first example, Sara and Linus perform the characters of the queen/mother and the young boy/her son, the new king, thereby lending their bodies and physical actions to the music drama on stage. In the second example, the singers have no set characters in a music drama, but still use their bodies for impersonating characters and performing choreographic actions in shorter ‘snap shot’ scenes. In examples 3 and 4, the singers take on a classical vocal concert approach. Here, the performing bodies are often expected to carry emotional expression, but it is mainly in the sounding space that meaning (and character) is produced. In example three, I, as the singer, use words, whereas we do not in example four. This presents the concert singer with two different performative positions, where the voice carries meaning through the use of words, portraying character and experience, or acts more similar to an instrument in non-mimetic music.

The operatic approach: opera improvisation

The following two examples are taken from performances with Opera-improvisatörerna.

1. *Miss Krappelstein!*

Example 2 shows parts of the final scene from a 30-minute improvised opera²⁹ with Svenska Kammarorkestern and conductor Erik Solén, which took place in in Örebro Konserthus, 14th October 2016. The performance has a traditional concert setting, with orchestra and conductor in the middle of the stage, performers in front and on either sides of the orchestra, and the young audience in the salon. As input for the improvisations, the young audience had delivered props³⁰ which were used in the performance. As will be shown in this example, the singers also turned directly to the audience to ask for help with the drama. In this improvised opera concept, the singers make vocal and physical actions as dramatic characters in situations, driving the story ahead freely in accordance with some dramaturgical structures (see, ‘To perform opera improvisation’) and the musical context they create with the pianist. The pianist functions as link to the conductor and chooses when and which piece the orchestra is to play, while playing piano recitatives and transitions.

²⁹ In OI’s orchestral project *Last Minute – An Opera Adventure!* (LM), operatic improvisation with piano is combined with vocal opera improvisation in orchestra repertoire pieces in new arrangements by Alexandra Orrgård Solén and Eric Solén.

³⁰ Such as the book used in the scene and the cowbell that sounds in the very end of the video.



Video example 2: *Miss Krappelstein*
<https://youtu.be/WSyu8HA3EqE>

In Table 1 below, a descriptive analysis of this scene is outlined. The columns describe the timeline (time), the main musical actions (musical actions), the words used by the singers (words) and a description of the main physical actions (physical actions) that are carried out by the performers. Gregor is the pianist, Alexandra is the female singer with black clothes, Sara is the female singer with yellow clothes and Linus is the male singer with a pink shirt.

Table1:
Descriptive analysis *Miss Krappelstein*

Time	Musical actions	Words	Physical actions
00:04	Gregor shadows L playing the same notes in p, recitativo in the style of Mozart Gregor supports L with higher intensity and chords, and stops when L is silent.	Sara: Miss Krappelstein! Linus: Förlåt men det är inte jag, jag är en enkel herdepojke som... har blivit ituttad att jag, och... Att jag, att jag, kanske, eh.. det kanske var, ja... Sara: Får jag titta?	Sara as the queen waves at the side, asking her servant to enter. Linus enters the stage carrying a book, and stops, hesitating. Sara approaches, staring at the book and takes it in her hand.
00:16	Gregor lands on a major chord and plays a lyrical, joyful, treble melody. Sara and Gregor shift into a lyrical arioso in minor. Sara lands on a low note and G silences. Sara a cappella.	Sara: Katitzi...det, är det han? Kan det vara min son, vad tror ni? Audience: Jaa! Sara: Han som försvann en dag... och sen dess, har jag... inte fått ett enda barn till.. och nu, är jag 45 nästa vecka, allt är kört, allt förbi... jag måste sitta på, tronen själv om inte..	Sara turns to the audience, asking them directly with a gesture. They reply directly. Alexandra quickly passes over the stage. Sara stands in the middle of the stage, hugging the book. Sara looks at L.
00:55	Gregor plays a leggiero treble melody.	Linus: Jag kan prova och sitta lite, en liten stund... Sara: Vänta, gravitationen, om, om...	Linus jumps closer to the chair. Sara stops him with a sign, approaching the chair, and looking at the percussionist Lars across the stage. L touches the back of the chair but stops.
1:03	Gregor is silent. Gregor continues with repeating notes and chords as Sara starts to sing in recitativo style.	Sara (declares with a lower voice) Om triangeln börjar klinga när du sätter dig, är det din tron. men om... den inte gör det...då far du ner i underjorden. Vågar du prova?	Sara still holds her hand up, walks backwards a few steps and looks at L. Linus gapes and looks out to the audience.
1:14	Gregor starts to play a continuing treble chord and continues downward in register with a crescendo. Gregor lands on a lower minor chord and continues through the low register in agitato, then further down	Linus (whispers): I underjorden... Sara: I underjorden till, pukors slammer och buller! Linus (grumps): Va? Nää...ja.... Sara: Du? Och nej, är triangeln också? Är det min son eller inte?	Linus stands hesitating and puts his hand to his mouth as S makes vivid gestures as playing the timpani. Sara looks at the percussionist again. Sara approaches the audience that does not answer.
01:32	Gregor lands on a low F. A low soft tremolo from the timpani as Gregor continues in the low register.	Sara: Jag vågar inte titta! Linus: Jag vågar inte sitta! Sara: Jag vågar inte titta! Linus: Jag vågar inte sitta!	The musicians smile and the percussionist prepares the sticks. Sara holds the book in front of her.

01:38		Agitated outbursts from both singers.	The musicians smile again
01:44	Alexandra sings a repeated motif Gregor starts the low tremolo motif with a baseline turning upwards, the timpani continues to tremble softly and Sra sings an inverted minor triad motif. Linus sings the inverted triad motif.	Alexandra: Du kan! Du kan! Sara: Jahaha! Vad kommer hända? Linus (speaks): Jag känner ingenting! Jag känner allting! (speaks) Ok, so, I must! And!	Linus stands in front of the chair with Sara behind the book on one side and Alexandra on the other at the same distance.
01:56	The triangle starts to tremble as Gregor lands on a low minor chord. Sara sings a high tritone motif a cappella and turns down in register as Gregor plays the triton motif in the treble.	L: (shouts) Nooow! Sara: Triangelns klang!	Linus sits down on the chair and the musicians laugh silently. Sara sits down on her knees and looks at L with her arms raised to the sky.
02:04	Linus makes a variant on the minor triad motif. Gregor makes an arpeggio in the middle register to shed light on A's entrance.	Linus: Är bra eller dåligt? Alexandra: Det är han!	Alexandra enters the stage. Sara holds her hand to her temple. Alexandra steps on stage and turns to the audience, holding her hands to her sides.
02:09	Gregor continues recitativo accompagnato in major in the lower register and S sings in the middle register. Gregor turns his melody upwards in register. G repeats a second motif.	Sara: Min migrän den lyfter, dimman lättar över bergen! Som Gluck skulle sagt! Det, h, h, han..? Alexandra: Det är den nya regenten. Sara: (speaks) Förlåt? Alexandra: Han, är den nya regenten! Och ni, kan dra er tillbaka! Till Bergen! Linus: Där pepparn växer! Sara: Min pojke!	Alexandra and Linus looks at Sara who kneels and lifts her hands to the sky and looks up. Sara stands up and turns to Linus. The concertmaster laughs. The conductor starts to prepare. Linus sits on the chair looking satisfied. The musicians prepare. Sara raises her hand to caress L's cheek.
02:39 02:50	Gregor's melody wanders up, then slowly down into the middle register Gregor lands on the dominant and Sara makes a simple upbeat cadenza. The orchestra starts playing 'Possente' (Verdi)	Sara: Det är du! Linus: Det är mamma! Sara: Sua madre! L: Sua... vad heter det.. sen då? Det vet jag inte! Sara: Det är inte padre, bara madre! Min älskade pojk! Trio (Not analysed)	Sara caresses his cheek and Alexandra stands with her hands on her clothing. Sara puts her hand on L's chest and they lightly hold each other's arms.

2. *Glass*

Video example 3 shows a collage scene from one of 12 performances in the project *Opera Nova – power, lover, remix* (ON). The performance took place at Moment:teater, Gubbängen on the 1st of April 2012. The opera had a traditional performance setting, with performers on stage and the audience consisting of adults and young adults in the salon. As input for this scene, a member of the audience had given a word: glass.

The technique used in this example is called collage (a technique we learned from Gottfredsson). A collage scene is not a part of a longer opera drama, and is performed as a single scene.

One singer enters and starts repeating the word from the audience in speaking voice, with a gesture, creating a loop. The other singers join in one by one until all are in, and the loop slowly develops into singing. Together with the pianist, the singers start to develop a theme. After a while, one of the singers make a solo while the others accompany with a continuing development of the loop. After the first solo, the singer stops in his phrase, creating a new loop which is blended with the other. The accompanying singers are free to choose to join in the second loop. One by one all the singers make solos, singing or in speaking voice, starting on the last person's looping word, and creating new loops in the end of the solo until there are a number of parallel loops which the singers can choose to pick up and develop further. As always, in the work of Oi, the singers are aware of how they arrange their movements and their choices of positions in the staged space, in terms of high/low, passive/active, back/front, slow/moving and so on. This is done in order to create a visually and dramaturgically diversified impression of the performance.

The collage was made in a performance project investigating aspects of power and gender in operatic performance, and in this collage scene, the theme was displaying aspects and roles of power. The singers could freely take on and create brief scenes inside the collage, using singing and/or speaking voices. The joint agreement in the ensemble was to take vantage point in the mastering suppression techniques as described by Berit Ås.³¹ In a presentation, these had been introduced to the audience just before the collage starts. The mastering suppression techniques that inspired the singers in this scene are:

- Heaping blame and putting to shame
- Making invisible

³¹ Berit Ås is a Norwegian professor in social psychology, specialised in gender research.

- Ridiculing
- Withholding information
- Damned if you do and damned if you do not (as collage improvisations are not part of a longer opera story, the singers could relate to this theme as they pleased by, for instance, using personal experiences. The singers relate to each other by taking on roles of power or submission in the brief scenes that emerge, while relating the physical movements to the changing vocal and instrumental music and their own intentions. (kjonnsforskning, n.d.)



Video example 3: Glass
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvNIDLFO1Vs&feature=youtu.be>³²

The headlines of the columns in Table 2 describing this scene differ from the previous table. The main difference is that this is not a dramatic scene in an operatic story, but a musico-choreographic improvisation scene with brief ‘snap shot’ dramatic scenes. Therefore, the singers oscillate between repeated, or looped musical and choreographic movements and transitions to vocal and physical actions, which carry meaning in their dramatic ‘snap shot’ solo scenes. The main scope of the collage technique is to create interactions between solo parts and ensemble loops. I have therefore divided the word column into two, to track these interactions. Musical actions and movements of soloists, ‘loopers’ and the pianist are placed in one column.

In order of appearance: Sara is the female singer in an orange jacket, Samuel the male singer in a blue jacket, Linus the male performer in a beige jacket, Therese the female singer in a golden jacket, and Alexandra the female singer in a purple jacket.

³² This recording has some technical issues, shaky hand camera.

2:15	<p>Linus walks slowly in front and makes a speaking solo, walking a bit back and forth, making gestures.</p> <p>In their loop, Samuel and Therese make longer, softer and slower movement phrases, into slow motion...</p>	<p>Linus: Jag försökte länge få kontakt med mitt inre...</p> <p>Jag hade blivit nån, som en liksom bara, som en yta som sprang omkring, som inte riktigt, liksom,</p>	<p>The loops make longer spoken tones.</p> <p>Samuel and Therese makes.</p>
2:30	<p>Gregor goes back to the treble theme.</p> <p>Linus climbs the bench and stands in the back, in the highest position of the stage.</p>	<p>Förstod vad som, pågick...</p> <p>Jag ringed till en psykolog... Han hörde inte vad jag sa...</p>	<p>longer, softer and slower singing phrases, into slow motion...</p>
2:44	<p>Linus makes a gesture as picking up a phone and starts a loop with the last word.</p>	<p>Hallå? Hallå?</p>	<p>..... Hallå..? Uppåt... Glas only moves.</p>
2:59	<p>Sara walks in front and sings a soprano pitch, soft solo, sounding afraid. She stops on the front left of the stage, making a position in contrast to the loopers, who stand on her back left.</p> <p>Gregor slowly intensifies his theme in the high register, adding lower notes in the chords. Sara repeats.</p>	<p>Sara: Hallå! Hallå? Så började mitt livs, hemskaste samtal.hur kunde det börja, hallå? Jag, fick ingen varning, jag var helt oföberedd... hallå, hallå? Så ni har, så ni har redan? Så ni har redan,</p>	<p>Samuel joins Linus on the bench.</p>
3:32	<p>the phrase on one note and goes to a high, soft, upset speaking voice, transcending to shouting with a soft female voice as she repeats a movement holding her hands to the chest and stomach as if hurt with a weapon.</p>	<p>Ni har redan bestämt att jag ska få sparken? På det där mötet där jag inte var med...</p>	
3:39	<p>Gregor and Samuel makes occasional short synchronised forte, low, notes. The loops quickly intensify their dynamics in lower registers into shouting as Sara replies with her phrase in soft piano.</p> <p>The ensemble makes a dynamic expansion into forte and then fades together.</p>		<p>När jag inte var med.. Glas.. Hallå...</p> <p>Therese joins Sara's loop.</p>
4:01	<p>Therese goes to the middle of the stage, continuing to keep her hands to her chest and makes a solo in long, expanding legato phrases, finished by a dramatic exclamation.</p> <p>She starts screaming as Gregor times her final syllable with a low tone.</p>	<p>Therese: När jag inte var med, när jag inte var med! Så pratade dom! Dom pratade! Om det, om mig.</p>	<p>Linus and Samuel expand their loop.</p>
4:22	<p>Therese stands accusing with her hands to the sides, switching between singing dramatic exclamations and screaming addressing the audience directly. Gregor accompanies by a dramatic recitativo accompagnato in atonal modernist style.</p> <p>Gregor starts a rhythmic figure in the right hand, followed by a dramatic base melody.</p>	<p>Om mig! De pratade! Inte var det nå snälla saker dom sa heller, nå det var de inte! Dom pratade, och pratade... så jävla hemska, hemska!</p>	<p>.....</p>

4:34	Therese starts looping a fortissimo exclamation from highest to lowest pitch. Gregor intensifies his part dynamically and in movement, making it more and more marcato, and Therese makes a diminuendo in her loop.		Hemsk! När jag inte var med... Hallå? Glas...
4:47	Linus and Samuel starts to shift approach on the bench, taking on a top-down attitude and Samuel starts to develop his phrase with new words.	Jamen lilla stumpan, det är ju, jamen det ordnar sig, det är inga problem!
4:59	Gregor slows down, shifting attitude into a repeated musical-like march theme in major. The ensemble settles in the new harmonic environment in a soft approach.		
5:22	The approaches in the bodies, becoming more open and disillusioned. Sara develops her spoken phrases more and takes the solo part again. Gregor makes a crescendo with Sara.	Sara: Det var när jag inte var med som inte... för jag var inte med så det måste varit jag... det måste vart mitt fel, för jag var ju inte där, så det var därför jag måste ha gjort det, för det var ju ingen av er som var där som gjorde det..! eller hur?
5:43	Samuel and Therese walk up to Sara.		
6:19	Samuel taps Sara on the head, smiles and sings a short solo, then loops his solo phrase while Therese looks at Sara. The others join in the front with Sara in the middle. The music and movements intensify and... Linus takes Sara's hand as if making her smash a glass to the floor repeatedly. All join in the smashing movement.	Samuel Det blir nog bra med det där!	Det blir nog bra med det där... Glas!
6:30	Sara starts to speak, as the fortissimo loops in the musical march continue. Therese, Alexandra and Sara starts to laugh loudly, pointing their fingers to something down on the floor.	Sara: Där ska du få din lilla djävla hund!
6:49	Dynamics and movement fade down as the singers start to look uncomfortable, some apathetic, some afraid. Three singers turn their back to the audience as Gregor starts to play a treble fanfare melody together with the chords that have turned into a modernist military march. The improvisers fade their music and cease their movement.	

Opera improvisation techniques

The descriptive analyses above may suggest that the opera improvisers in action are dramatically and musically analytical during performance. However, many of the impulses generating the interactions are created intuitively. During the rehearsals we explore possibilities rather than working out fixed formats. This method is

typical for vocal practices in a development phase (Potter, 1998, p. 164). Below I list some parameters that I perceive are vital in the practice of the improviser.³³

Inside the fictive situation

As in many other stage performance traditions, opera improvisation mainly deals with situated action (see below). In short, this means that the actor uses questions similar to the ones suggested by Penka (after Johansson, 2012, p. 34) as the basic notions of defining actions of a role in a dramatic situation.³⁴

- Who? The performer and his/her own role in the current situation
- Where? The place of the events that take place
- When? The time of the events that take place
- What? The actions of the performer in the situation
- Why? The reason for these actions
- How? How the actions are carried out

It is central to the opera improviser to define the situation and the role function of the dramatic character that s/he takes on in the situation, how the situation emerges, at the same time as s/he interprets the intentions and wills of the other improvisers from musical and dramatic perspectives. I call improviser's perspective from inside the dramatic situation the *praxis* perspective, from the Greek word meaning action.

Games and techniques

As noted above, much of the work is based on techniques for communication, interaction and creativity. These techniques have developed as a result of the work and experiences of many years, and have become part of the craft of the opera improviser. The techniques combine musical features and performance styles from Western classical or contemporary art music and opera traditions with stage acting, movement and principles and rules from modern theatre improvisation (Johnstone,

³³ See also Wilén, 2013a, p. 130.

³⁴ Johansson refers to 'the five V's' (de fem V:na, p. 34, my translation) in Penka's method: Who am I? Where am I? Why am I there? What time is it? What do I want?. Johansson uses the word figure (p. 40, 'figur, my translation Swedish) which correlates to the actor's portrayal of the role in the written script. Since we create the roles ourselves in improvisation, I use the word role here. See also discussions of the concept 'vocal persona' in *The performing singer as persona(e)* below.

1985; Spolin, 1999). These games or techniques are often spontaneously applied by the improvisers.

Perspectives of the opera improviser

The perspectives of the opera improviser refer to many layers of parallel situations that happen at the same time, or quickly follow each other, while putting the individual in altering subject positions, and different discourses. This line of argument is inspired by Dyndahl and Weider Ellefsen (2009), who claim that processes of subjectivity and identity are enacted/constructed at the same time, as are their different contexts. These processes cause the opera improviser oscillate between different perspectives, for instance praxis and mythos as listed below.

- Praxis – action
- Mythos – dramaturgy
- Rhetorical – audience
- ‘Lyrical bubbles’ – character’s experience
- Musical interaction, material and form
- Idiomatic/intertextual/interperformative (relating to tradition) perspective
- Personal perspective
- Research perspective

Dramaturgy

Oi often perform live operas of 45 minutes or more, where a joint image of how to create the structure of the emerging opera is important. In order to achieve this, the ensemble often works with a simplified form inspired by the dramaturgy of Aristotle (1961); a beginning, a middle and an end with transitional stages in between. This can be seen as an example of what Silverstein describes as a vital function of improvisation: to work with ‘the essential components of drama itself’ (in Clark, 2002, p. 57). The format includes the introduction of characters, a problem and friction between two contrasting powers, a solution to the problem and a clear ending. Oi also collects inspiration from opera repertoire performances, movement, poetry, storytelling, clown techniques, theatre and film. Central questions in this work are for example: How do we enact relationships? How can we be clear and yet leave space for action to each other? How can we enact relationships to a context or a place without scenography? I call this the *mythos* perspective, from the Greek word for story.

Acceptance and listening

A central component in opera improvisation is that the improvisers must stay open to offers from other performers, and sometimes from the audience. Similarly, Johnstone (1985) finds this to be one of the most important rules in improvisation theatre, to accept the offers of the colleagues instead of blocking them by ignoring, or not leaving space to other actors. On the other hand, offering friction in terms of a contrasting will or resistance gives the improviser the possibility to be open to other suggestions while sticking to a particular line of action.

Listening to the others, both in performance and rehearsals, is also central in order to learn how the individual improvisers function, since all performers are different. Opera improvisation singers often prefer to work with certain qualities and avoid others. During a performance all opera improvisers are constantly present on stage, in order to pay close attention to what happens on stage. In a longer form this is of particular importance, since all information on characters and events is vital and may change the course of the events.

Audience relations

An important part of Oi's work is to find relevant ways to include the audience in the performance. This includes what to ask, when and not least how to act. Should we ask for a place, a relation a musical style, a problem, a time of day or a dream? What we ask the audience affects the initial approach, which sets the tone for the performance. In rehearsals, we try out different ways in order to see which kinds of answers lead where and what is most beneficiary for the technique we are developing.

Inner images and presence

Since we seldom use scenography or props, the inner images and imaginations of the improvisers are crucial to make agreements on stage work. This is not unique for opera improvisation, but it is essential here, since the concentration of the emergent material would easily break if the performers hesitated to engage in the present moment.

Musical context

Experiences of work with classical Western repertoire and its idioms and styles is central in the work of opera improvisation, as I see it. It becomes a source of knowledge and inspiration that we address and relate to, often on intuitive, or subconscious levels. This also concerns the musical formats that form important

parts of the performances, such as specific types of aria, recitative or ensemble. This might be compared to how Folkestad (2017) describes opera improvisation as an example of intertextuality in practice, in interactional processes which ‘presuppose a common agreement concerning stylistic conventions and the musical language in use’ (p. 159). A musical form or structure can also offer resistance, which can be much needed in order to avoid a narrative to develop too fast.

The physical space

In opera improvisation we often use the technique, ‘space work’, deriving from the mime tradition, where actions are performed ‘in thin air’. This also concerns relations between bodies in the physical space, and movement, since it is of importance to be constantly aware of how the arrangement of the bodies on stage communicate to the co-improvisers and the audience.

The concert approach: lyrical improvisation

This example comes from a performance with Impromans.

3. *Walpurgis fire*

The improvised song in Video example 4 is part of a concert lecture in the chamber music hall at Helsingborgs Konserthus, 22 april 2017. The performers are placed on stage in a traditional song recital setting, and the adult audience, are seated in the salon. The improvisation technique used is improvised song with text (which we call impromans), in a concert performance format.

Walpurgis fire is the second in a cycle of four improvised songs. It is created from a word written by an audience member when entering the concert hall, as a response to the question: what do you think of when you hear the word spring? These notes were collected in a vase, and kept by the concert producer, so that no one could read them beforehand. Just before the improvised song cycle started, I asked one person in the audience to pick four notes to use from the vase, to use as a vantage point for the songs. Before each song in the cycle, I picked one of the four notes and read the word out aloud.



Video example 4: *Walpurgis Fire*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_4M7f9FCMA&feature=youtu.be

As this table (Table 3) describes an improvised solo song, the description column includes vocal and musical interactions, resembling structural aspects. However, this does not mean that the improvisers work with musical structure as an articulated common technique. Rather, the musical form is a result of the development during the improvisation.

Table 3:
Descriptive analysis, *Walpurgis fire*

Time	Description of musical interactions	Text
00:00	Sara reads the text of the note.	Valborgsbål.
00:17	Theme A As Conny strikes a dramatic chord, the singer replies in exclamations with high leaps.	Röken stinker! Från är luften!
00:35	Theme B A soft, moderato theme in d minor with ticking chords, where Sara makes calm melodic phrases is repeated twice, the second time more intensified.	En hög så stor med allt från ifjol.. Alla barnen springer runt.. En hög så stor, med allt från i fol. Och jag är här!
01:08	Theme A1 The dramatic chords and the exclamations are varied and extended by making rhythmic shifts. The vocal part lands on a low pitch.	Du lämnade mig! Du lämnade mig. Ensam.
01:20	A calming transgression part where the pianist and the singer make downward movements.	Ensam. Att vaka våren! Ensam...
01:31	Theme B1 The d-minor theme recurs, with a first more intensive vocal phrase, followed by two sequenced phrases with broader leaps from high to low pitch.	Röken från I mina ögon! Grannar som ler. Barnen som springer
01:52	Brief piano transgression, slowing down in a choral phrasing	
02:00	Vocal part a cappella, in one long phrase with an intensive dramatic timbre, ending in a high pitch, as a question mark.	Hur ska jag kunna vaka, våren?
02:10	Piano recitativo mirroring the vocal part, landing in two low E-flat major chords with a seventh in the bass.	Utan, dig?
02:30	Piano ending in low register, a somber chord with a wandering upwards melody in the left hand, varying the final vocal phrase, landing on the dominant, A.	

Lyrical improvisation techniques

Conny Antonov and I have worked together with opera improvisation in opera formats for many years and with students at the Music Academy in Malmö. Hence, we share the knowledge and techniques that I mention in the sections below.

Interactions in the musical space

An improvised song, or an 'impromans', is characterised by traits from vocal chamber music. Since the format is often not staged (although we have worked

much with solo scenes over the years), most of the improvisational interaction takes place in a joint musical space, or layer. This means that the musical form and articulation of the phrases and musical colours are more central than often in opera improvisation in dramatic formats.

Inner images

The improvisations mostly take a word from the audience as point of departure, and the music emerges as a consequence of what we associate with this word. Here the individual inner images of the performers become central. When we get the word from the audience I often perceive an inner image in terms of a situation, or a place where I am. When we improvise I keep the experiences of being in this inner place and how the environment affects me: what I see, hear and sense. Remaining in the details of the experiences, and describing or giving voice to them, is a way for me as a singer to work when I become stressed during the improvisation.

Intentions as vocal and musical actions

In the improvisations, both singer and pianist occasionally use the intention 'translated' into musical gesture, or vocal and musical actions, as vantage point. This approach is based in joint work with vocal actions as gestures and sounds based on the Laban/Lillieqvist system (Antonov, Håkansson, Wilén, 2009)³⁵ which is described further below. Since the singer uses words, the intentions of the vocal phrases often obtain a bearing function. At the same time, the role of the piano is vital when it comes to harmonic, dynamic aspects of the music, as well as in the choice of register, timbre and articulation. According to Laban (1988), the movements a person makes over time transform into physical attitudes, which have an important role in identity formation. Laban compared movement composition to language. Just as sentences are built from words, dancing phrases are built from movements in geometrical forms. According to Laban, all human action involves movement sequences that in turn consist of efforts (Laban, 1988, p. 8).³⁶ Laban constructed a system consisting of eight movements directed by three main parameters: tempo, dynamics and direction in the space. In his pedagogical practice, the Swedish singer and teacher Torbjörn Lillieqvist has combined these movements with sound into sound movements, or sounding actions³⁷ (Antonov, Håkansson,

³⁵ See Appendix

³⁶ Basic referential movements (basala referensrörelser), (Antonov, Håkansson & Wilén, 2009, p. 28).

³⁷ As noted above, this system is occasionally used in Impromans and my teaching at MAM.

Wilén, 2009, p. 29). These are highly useful to singers and musicians in improvisation since they provide a set of contrasting sound actions that can be used in musical and musicodramatic dialogues.

The concert format: CCVI without words in dialogue with visual art

Video example 5 is recorded in a performance at the vernissage of Magdolna Szabó at Staffanstorps Konsthall, 17 February 2015.³⁸ The audience was placed in the middle of the room and the performers stood directed towards the painting that they were addressing. In this performance, the improvisers had no dialogue with the audience. Instead, the improvisations were directly inspired by a chosen number of paintings in the hall. Five paintings were selected and our individual visual impressions and interpretations of the art works formed the most important part of the performance. During the 40-minute performance, the performers changed positions and directions in relation to the five chosen paintings, making a slow triangular movement around the audience. In each of the five improvisations, we chose different instrumental setups, and different roles for the performers. This created variety and dynamics in the sounding experience as compared to a performance with an overall narrative.



Video example 5: Vernissage
<https://vimeo.com/216709268> ³⁹

³⁸ The concert format has also been investigated in dialogue with lights and electronics, as will be discussed below.

³⁹ This recording has some technical issues, wobbly camera in the beginning.

The improvisation is a vocal duo in concert format, without words. It is inspired by a white painting that I associated to a Swedish high mountain landscape, covered in new, soft and older, frozen snow. Since this improvisation is without words, I describe the musical interactions in Table 4 below.

Table 4:
Descriptive analysis *Vernissage*

Time	Description of musical interactions
00:00	Theme A Sara starts with a long, lyrical upgoing solo-phrase in soprano register with G as central tone, inspired by <u>D</u> ala chorale tonality. Tiina supports with a murmuring sound. Sara makes a new solo phrase with a second, slightly developed phrase in the same tonality.
00:29	Transition Tiina mixes a repeated note in middle register with the murmuring sound, and Sara replies with a higher, repeated note.
00:40	Theme A1 Sara leads into this part, as she sustains a long note and repeats the second solo phrase of the theme while Tiina contributes with long notes in the middle register as supportive harmony.
01:09	In their respective functions the two singers create new responsive phrases with C as central note, repeating it once like an echo and sustaining the final note in a <i>diminuendo</i> .
01:22	Transition At the exact same time they start a parallel movement with long notes, moving from H to F#, with switched places so that Tiina is the higher solo voice and Sara the lower, supporting.
01:37	Theme B Tiina makes a long, lyrical phrase in the same register as theme A, from Hdim to B-flat, supported by Sara's long notes in the lower register, eventually landing on a parallel octave The singers make two responsive phrases between C and D, one echoing the other, where Tiina has the solo, higher voice and Sara the lower, shadowing.
02:17	Theme A2 Both singers start at exactly the same time in the initial tonality, with variation on two phrases of the same length as in the beginning. In this variant, the voices are more equal. In the first phrase, Sara is the higher voice with solo and Tiina shadows as the lower voice. In the second phrase, Tiina takes solo initiative as lower voice and Sara as higher voice echoes the gesture. They land on an A-flat open fifth.
02:44	Sara takes initiative to a final, brief coda, as Tiina supports with long notes, and they land on D and G.

CCVI without words in dialogue with art – techniques

When improvising without words⁴⁰ in a concert format, musical and interactional aspects are in focus. I find it central to investigate parameters such as form, timbre, dynamics, articulation and musical material, and the relation to the physical space.

⁴⁰ These methods are partly a result of my collaboration with Mattias Hjorth (bass player and head of the jazz department) in our teaching in a course of improvisation for classical musicians at MAM.

In order to work with elements of development and change in the musical improvisations, we use techniques of storytelling.⁴¹

The set of questions discussed in the section, '*Inside the fictive situation*' above have been useful for defining a performer's role and function in the musical situation. These questions are useful in order to define what function the musical actions of the improviser would have in the music that emerges. For instance, if the frame of an exercise is to investigate a certain palette of timbres and sounds in group improvisation, you could say that the question 'what?' above is answered. However, if nothing is said about which musical style is to be used, the question 'how?' is up to the performer to answer through making his/her own musical choices in dialogue with the group. We devise ways of creating musical role-taking, by choosing patterns of action such as contrast or similarity. This makes it possible to use similar vocal actions as in improvised songs. But here the intentions are musical or gestural, such as leading, shadowing, looping, rather than dramatic or poetic.

So far, these descriptions suggest that the use of words, inner images and music as expressions of emotions and experiences of a character create common points of departure for singer and pianist (See Table 3, *Walpurgis fire*). The body and voice of the singer and the music of the pianist carries expressive meaning, and the music shows similarities to art song from the 20th century. As seen in Table 4 (*Vernissage*) the singers use their voices to express impressions of a piece of art, however not as characters, nor in order to create an emergent 'concrete' narrative, but rather as the musicians, Sara and Tiina, developing a musical theme.

⁴¹ In order to provide the group with the same conceptual framing of the development of a story in the improvisations, we work with a basic exercise of five sentences, where each sentence correlate with a stage in a linear dramaturgy: platform, presentation, conflict, turning point and ending.

Artistic research as situated processes: performativity, action and situation(s)

In this chapter, I address the methods used in the project for contextualizing, articulating and analysing CCVI. In order to address the research questions, the main methodological strands in my exploration of interactional processes in classical vocal improvisational practice are:

- i. developing methods of analysis and communication of the interplay and musico-dramatic actions in performance,
- ii. recontextualizing insights and ideas inspired by theoretical vantage points and issues emanating from scholarly studies into the artistic practice, as well as developing performance/production concepts and methods.

This can be seen both as practice-led artistic research, derived from an ‘artistic hunch’ (Rubidge, 2004) and as ‘research in the arts’ (Borgdorff, 2006). The following section provides a theoretical framework through which classical vocal performance can be conceptualised, analysed and challenged.⁴²

The artistic and analytical methods overlap, but do not always coincide. They can be described as standing in a dialectical relationship to each other. Therefore, the theoretical and technical points of departure, methods and results, can be perceived and problematised on many levels, as described and discussed further below. Research material has been collected during rehearsals, performances and in discussions, in form of notes, video and audio recordings and images. This material has been studied, analysed and discussed in relation to connected fields such as musical improvisation, opera, musicology, theatre and cultural studies. In parts of the project, qualitative methods such as interviews, stimulated recall sessions and

⁴² In the five articles that form part of this dissertation (Wilén 2013 a; 2013b, 2014, under consideration, a, manuscript submitted for publication b), more relevant theoretical concepts are used in discussions of improvisational practice.

video analysis have been used (see the following chapters below). In order to address the research questions, the material come in a spectrum of textual and video approaches: as academic text, conversation transcripts, creative writing and video analysis. The collected material thus instigates a variety of actions: describing, contextualizing, analysing, portraying and discussing.

Situatedness

Experiences and techniques used in the artistic work are also useful in the design of the research processes and the materials. For an opera improviser, it is vital to (re)define the situation and her own function and role in a constantly emerging scene, and as a result of the blending of the intentions of the other improvisers as well as her subjective aims and goals. The musical interaction and the rhetorical situation are also important perspectives. We also interact with our own experiences of repertoire, performative traditions and idiomatic features, on intertextual and interperformative levels (Wilén, 2013a). The questions that are suggested for a researcher to situate her/his research by Hannula (2005)⁴³ in fact show some similarities to the questions that are used by an actor in situated acting Who am I? Where am I? Whom do I want to address? (See above). These question are crucial, both in the situation of an artistic researcher and of an opera improviser in performance.

Hannula (2005) uses two metaphors to describe the practice of artistic research: i) an abundance of methods; and ii) a democracy of experiences that may show great differences in relation to each other. This diversity should be combined with critical self-reflection in order to create an ethical approach in artistic research. In line with this, Hannula underlines how an artistic researcher must strive to define his or her stand points and locality in different contexts, as the research grows and develops. This goes well in hand with Haraway (1988) who claims that situated, embodied knowledge derives from positioning in specific communities. This creates a vulnerable, located perspective, which is a key feature of knowledge formation, resisting politics of closure.

⁴³ Hannula (2005) addresses the following questions '---as a way to perceive oneself in relation to oneself and one's surroundings. Who are you? Where are you? How are you the way you are? Who are you with? And where would you like to go? Finally, the question remains: 'What do you want?'' (p. 152, writer's quotes).

Its images are not the products of escape and transcendence of limits (the view from above) but the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subjective position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment of living within limits and contradictions – of views from somewhere. (Haraway, 1988, p. 590)

I have aimed to position myself in a number of performative situations and explorative processes, together with fellow performers. However, since almost none of the performers have had research funding⁴⁴, but rather have been part of performance projects, very little time has been available for joint analysis of research material. In order to provide some perspectives of the other performers in the development of this material, I have used stimulated recall sessions in some of the projects, along with some written feedback (GoL, 2016) and documentation of improvisations in video, images and audio. The work with developing the analytical and methodological models used here has been conducted by me alone.

A multilayered process

According to Borgdorff (2006), artistic practices in themselves are hermeneutic practices, where experimental activity is an essential part. In a summary of his discussion of artistic practice from ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives he declares that ‘Art practice – both the art object and the creative process – embodies situated, tacit knowledge that can be revealed and articulated by means of experimentation and interpretation’ (Borgdorff, 2006, p. 18, writer’s italics). Such experimentation can also be seen as an attempt to explore layered contexts of artistic research, as proposed by Frisk & Östersjö (2013):

We suggest that, rather than being a non-academic and independent research discipline, artistic research is situated in a multilayered and multidimensional space principally defined by four non-conformal fields of gravitation: the subjective, the academic, the experimental, and the field of the art world. (p. 42)

I would like to add to this observation, the field of musical learning, which is central to classical music, since institutional learning serves as a point of departure for this musical practice. Furthermore, many of the professional musical agents in the

⁴⁴ Conny Antonov participated in the project as part of his research as senior lecturer at MAM. In the performance project with Audio Activists, the participation of Fabio Monni was made possible as he was engaged as teacher at MAM during the lab sessions.

classical field also work with teaching, privately or within institutional frameworks of higher musical education (HME).

The research processes in SIA consist of ongoing parallel cycles of action research, where experiences of previous work become assets in new explorative sub-projects in reflective collaboration with the colleagues in the ensemble at hand, and with respect to their individual goals and aims in the performance project (which indeed may differ from mine). Meanwhile, as a singer-researcher, I work with literature studies and analyses of previously documented projects, which in turn affect my understanding and participation in the artistic work. The design of this introductory part may indicate a certain chronological order in how the theory presented and reflected is chosen. However, the development of these theoretical models are a result of ongoing abductive and reflective processes carried out by me throughout the project. These parallel processes potentially create interactive ‘feedback loops’ (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 39) which affect both my own work and the work of colleagues in the performance parts of the project.

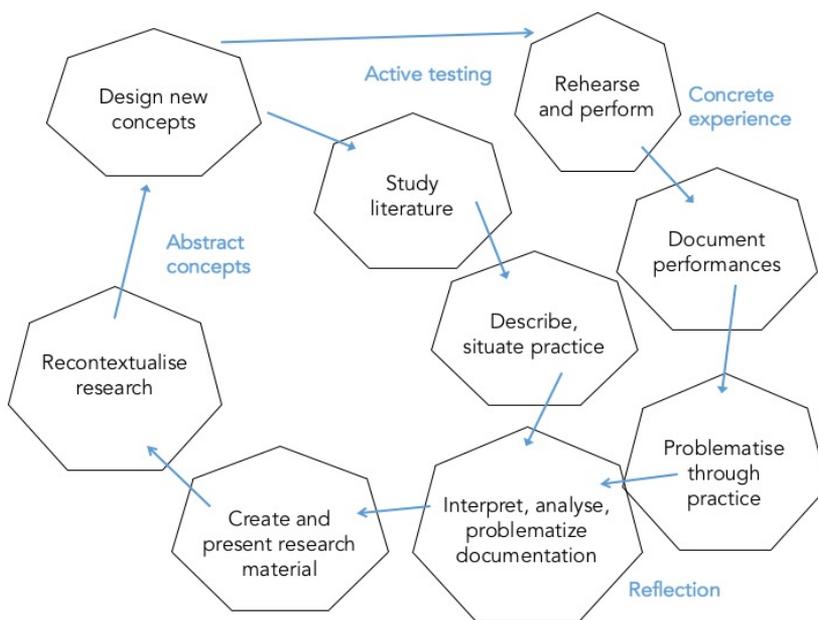


Figure 1: Parallel artistic research processes (inspired by Kolb 1984).

The theoretical and historical aspects outlined in the thesis are related to research in a number of fields. My intention is to situate vocal classical performance in relation to how it is practiced and has been perceived in other fields of research. The

purpose is to develop a theoretical grid for analysing and discussing CCVI from the improviser's perspective. I have noted that much research in classical vocal performance automatically takes the perspective of the viewer, or of the consumer. Much research in music has focused on music as structure rather than communication, and even Fischer-Lichte (2008), who deconstructs the conceptual frames of live performance into a new performative analytical universe, takes the perspective of the outer eye. The aim is to address and communicate aspects of performativity from the perspective of the actor. This also includes tracking and articulating processes of the actual interplay that goes on between the improvisers.

The research material and documentation is collected in rehearsals, performances and discussions on video, audio or in notes, and is presented, studied, analysed and reflected on from different perspectives relating to connected fields such as musical improvisation, cultural studies, opera, rhetoric, theatre and relevant literature. In parts of the project, qualitative methods such as interviews and video analysis have been used. The use of the documentation used in this project is made possible by the consent of the other partakers, orally or by email. The intertwining of artistic work and research studies has created new lines of action and ideas during the project. Ideas and concepts have provided tools for describing and articulating aspects of the artistic processes in writing and analysis-

The project has artistic and pedagogical implications and the musico-dramatic action methods of improvisation have been applied in dialogue with young singers and musicians in various contexts for over ten years, especially at the vocal performance program and the opera master's programme at MAM as well as institutions abroad.

The following chapters focus on my work with approaching and articulating the intuitive and non-articulated techniques in CCVI performances, in order to develop a relevant conceptual grid for analysing and communicating layers of interaction.

Analytical points of departure

Performativity⁴⁵ is a term constructed by the philosopher of language, J.L Austin, in the 1950s. It is a way to describe the transformative power of an utterance, as it

⁴⁵ See also Wilén, 2013b and Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a.

both constitutes and refers to the social reality that it addresses (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 24). In other words:

A performative utterance always addresses a community represented by the people in a given situation – it can therefore be regarded as the performance of a social act (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 25).

As an overarching research perspective, performativity may provide tools for investigating improvisations ‘on the floor’ as well as their possible impact. In this project, I will use performativity as an analytical concept on a number of levels inspired by Harding (1986). First, it can be seen on a semiotic, or symbolic level, in terms of how a performative act in performance is interpreted (both by co-performers and spectators). Second it can be seen on a more general, or structural level of artistic practice. Third, following Fischer-Lichte’s wording above, since a performative utterance takes place in a social situation, the vocal and musical actions performed in CCVI are performative on an individual level. This means that exploring the actions of the improvisers in performance is highly relevant from a performative perspective.

Gender and performativity

According to a feminist, poststructuralist stance, perhaps most clearly represented by Judith Butler, gender is performative; a cultural construction rather than a biological fact. It is a dimension of identity that is manifested through our actions (Ambjörnsson, 2007) rather than our physical bodies. Butler (2007) claims that the gendered body is performative in the sense that gender is not a fixed identity with an ontological core connected to physical attributes, but rather a frail one. Gender comes as an effect of the stylization of acts which have the function to create the illusion of a gender-fixed, permanent ‘I’. Since gender is created through repeated social stagings, Butler argues that the ideas of a normative heterosexuality with binary essential gender, in the sense of true and permanent masculinity and femininity, are actually sedimented, reified body styles which found the binary gender norms.

Butler (1993) sees the performative as a domain where power is constructed as discourse. Through daily bodily acts, an illusion of stable self is created as an effect of reflecting norms (2007). It is also a way of embodying certain historical and cultural possibilities, much similar to a theatrical performance, thereby generating the physical body and its actions as marked by socially instituted meanings and

cultural codes (in Fischer-Lichte, 2008, pp. 27-28). According to Beauvoir (2008), an individual is not constituted with an essential core of personality. Rather, 'personality' develops through the actions s/he makes in the lived situations, which, in turn, are dependent on social factors. Meanwhile, Beauvoir claims that men in Western culture have always possessed all real power and defined man as the centre of existence and civilization, whereas the woman has been categorised by the man as a gendered creature ('könsvarelse', Beauvoir, 2008, p. 26, my translation) or the Other (ibid.) in a categorization which is as old as conscience itself.

Harding (1986) noted the need for a more nuanced analytic grid in gender analysis, which takes different societal aspects into account. She outlines a model suggesting three levels of gender analysis: the symbolic, the structural and the individual, motivated as below:

An adequate theorization of gender will always lead us to ask questions about the interactions between gender symbolism, the particular way in which social labor or activity is divided by gender, and what constitutes gendered identities and desires in any particular culture. (Harding, 1986, p. 55-56)

Gender relations are performative and are constantly being recreated by all individuals, everyday, which means that we have the possibility to change (Connell & Pearse, 2015). In stage performance, this can be done by portraying, showing and playing with how these naturalised norms work. This can also be applied to other power structures and relations, not only to gender.

When gender [and power] is 'alienated' or foregrounded, the spectator is able to see what s/he can't see: a sign system as a sign system. The appearance, words gestures, ideas, attitudes that constitute the gender lexicon become illusionistic trappings that are *nevertheless* inseparable from, embedded in the body's habitus. Understanding gender as ideology – as a system of beliefs and behaviour mapped across the bodies of women and men which reinforces a social status quo – is to appreciate the continued timeliness of a *Verfremdungseffekt*, the purpose of which is always to denaturalise and defamiliarise what ideology – and performativity- makes seem normal, acceptable, inescapable. (Diamond, 1997, p. 47, writer's italics)

Inspired by Butler, Bolt (2016) suggests that *performativity* constitutes a new research paradigm in the arts, focusing on the effects of artistic research through force of iterative actions with the aim to create change through movement of thought, deed and word (p. 130): 'Thus far, my account of performativity provides an alternative account of how 'the new' emerges through iterative practice, rather than through the singular act' (Bolt, 2016, p. 136). This perspective allows us to

begin to recognise the conventions (context of theory, context of practice) and map the ruptures in practice. Further, it helps us to understand both art as an effect and also what art does in the world (Bolt, 2016, p. 136). As discussed in earlier writings (Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a), I see that artistic research focusing on stage performance practices benefits from using performativity as point of departure. It allows for researchers to apply and modify their critical thinking in many stages of the artistic and analytical work. This offers a possibility for researchers to bridge the common gap between the concrete and personal artistic reflective experiences to a wider artistic discourse, as called for by Vassenden (2013) in his examination of the Norwegian Artistic Programme.

Using performativity as conception of a critical artistic practice (Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a), Bolt poses questions that can be applied in the analytical work of this project:

- How did the research shift material practice in the field?
- What new concepts emerged through the research?
- Do these new concepts shift understandings and practices in the field and/or in other discursive fields? (Bolt, 2016, p. 141)

In this project, the concept of performativity allows for an analysis which addresses both the artistic work on the floor and structural perspectives on artistic practice. In the beginning of this section, I relate Bolt's conception of performativity to Harding's three analytical levels above (symbolic, structural and individual), in my analysis of CCVI (Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a). These levels, or perspectives, make it possible for me to articulate and analyse how we take up roles on stage and create narratives; how the work roles are distributed in CCVI as compared to in contexts driven by the regulative work concept.⁴⁶ To paraphrase Harding above, a theory-based investigation of performative aspects of opera improvisation could be formulated thus: An adequate theorization of *performativity* will always lead us to ask questions about the interactions between *performative* symbolism, the particular way in which social labour or activity is divided by *performative* discourse, and what constitutes *performative* identities and desires in any particular culture.

This point of departure is supported by Fischer-Lichte (2008). She suggests a new analytical approach to acknowledge performance as active process: "the

⁴⁶ For a more detailed outline of this analytical approach, please see Wilén (manuscript submitted for publication a).

transformation from a work of art to an event” (p. 23). She refers to the performative turn that took place in theatre in the 1960s, where the traditional roles of performer and spectator were challenged and turned into oscillating relations.⁴⁷ When performers and spectators shift positions within the social situation(s) at hand, they become actors in communicative, situated processes, or auto-poietic feedback loops (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). Seeing performance as a communicative process is also an effective way of deconstructing the Western normative understanding of art: as divided into production, work and reception of aesthetic objects. In the 1960s a widened perspective, including the spectator’s aesthetic experience was added to the traditional focus on production in performance studies (Sauter, 2004, p. 14). Still, the perspective of the performer is rarely addressed in these research contexts.

The notion of performance as situated process is highly useful in exploring CCVI. The practice does not aim to produce musical works or cultural products, but rather to use music, drama and text as tools to create live musical or operatic dialogues between performers and audience in emergent narrative processes or materials. Performativity is vital in exploring both the interactional processes on stage and for problematizing and experimenting with classical vocal performance practice and musical agency in this context. This stance highly affects which aspects of the documented artistic work that are to be taken into account in my thesis, since it is not so much the aesthetic as the performative qualities that are in focus.

Tropes as intertextual and interperformative play

In my work, I find the concepts of intertextuality and interperformativity (Wilén 2013a, Wilén 2013b) useful when describing the reflective and critical potential in my improvisational practice in writing. The investigations of these concepts in my artistic practices have led to a number of varied projects, experiments and performances (see further below). For some years I have searched for a relevant term for analysing and describing how these intertextual and interperformative processes take place in the artistic practice. Inspired by Sawyer’s use of the term, ‘ready-made’ (2003, p. 112) to describe a common phenomenon of reusing and varying musical figures in jazz, I used the Swedish word *schablon*⁴⁸, which can be translated as a mix

⁴⁷ Wilén, 2013b contains an analytical discussion with examples from the project ON (2012) where scenes from the operas *Carmen* (Bizet) and *Tosca* (Puccini) were performed through techniques of deconstruction, in order to problematise the performative relations: between performers, authors and spectators, as well as musical work and performance as process.

⁴⁸ Translated as *cliché* in Wilén, 2015.

of idiom and cliché (however less pejorative than the latter). Since this concept was not possible to translate to English I have now chosen to use the term *trope*, which I believe is more useful.

Oxford Dictionary (n.d.) describes a trope as, i) 'a figurative or metaphorical use of a word or expression', and ii) 'a significant or recurrent theme; a motif' (n.p.). It derives from the Greek word *tropos*, meaning turn, and was a vital part of classical rhetorical skills. Since pragmatic linguistic theories (that form one base of my research) are focused on structural aspects of language, a rhetorical concept such as trope is a good complement in my project. Rhetorics focus on dynamic and functional aspects of communication (Hellspong, 2013), centring language as intentional actions in concrete examples, which are at play here.⁴⁹ In a trope the 'normal' relation between expressions and content in a linguistic sign or utterance (Hellspong, 2001) is altered. One of the most central tropes is the metaphor, where a certain meaning of a concept 'slips over' into another, while an imagined likeness or analogy between the two remains as a relation. Analogical thinking, by the use of metaphor, is a fundamental linguistic and creative instrument in creating new thoughts and meanings, for instance in models and metaphors used in research (ibid). A trope can be seen as the interface between individual and collective sign systems and activities, as it structures and shapes the fundamental problematic relation (and gap) between individual experience and performance and the means for collective linguistic communication and expressions. It is an interface where the individual expresses and positions her/himself in rhetorical dialogue with the cultural codes, meanings, contexts and discourses that are at play (ibid). A study of tropes is therefore useful when investigating relations between symbolic, structural and individual performative aspects of creative stage performance vocal and musical acts.

In popular culture, the concept has gained popularity on open-source websites where members list aspects of telling stories, such as character types, storylines, symbolic meanings and action patterns that are found in TV and film. TV tropes (n.d.) have a catchy description: 'For creative writer types, tropes are more about conveying a concept to the audience without needing to spell out all the details' (n.p.). In modern media culture, the concept can also be used negatively, referring to all too well-known concepts.

In cognitive sciences, the concept of trope is used to address figures of thought which over time become more or less naturalised patterns of conception and

⁴⁹ In earlier work I have conducted rhetorical analysis of a solo opera improvisation scene with Impromans from 2011 (see homepage).

expression. A study of thinking metaphors and tropes is an established way to develop critical thinking in humanism. It is common to take literature, films, cultural events and other cultural texts as point of departure for these kinds of critical analyses, contingently justified by a validity based on 'the aesthetic claim that life is mirrored in art' (O'Brien, 2014, p. 29).

In music, the term has been used especially for a primarily oral, originally improvisational technique used in 10th- and 11th century European church music (Burkholder, Grout & Palisca, 2010). During the following centuries tropes were used as tools for song improvisation with accompaniment in secular music and in vocal sacred music (Potter & Sorrell, 2012). As Hatten (1994, 2004) defines it, in his analyses of classical music by Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, troping in music is used in order to create new expressive meanings, by fusing or colliding two incompatible elements, in terms of material or genre: '... the trope moves freely to combine or detach previously separate or attached meanings, working over the two-dimensional hierarchy of the semantic field and giving it the multidimensional flexibility of a semantic work' (Hatten, 1994, p. 189).

Lönnroth's (2011) use of the concept of 'oral text' I find useful when discussing intertextual (and interperformative) aspects of CCVI. It relates 'not only to words but also the human voice, gestures, music, facial expressions, acting, interaction with the audience and the relationship to the place of the performance.' (Wilén, 2013a)

I see tropes as a useful concept for understanding and explaining aspects of vocal stage performance, which might include vocal as well as physical and musical actions (or utterances) as tools for keying a social – staged – framework and context. Following Butler (1993), performativity is where power acts or is being constructed as discourse, where we – knowingly or not – take on roles, positions or functions in relation to each other as social groups on many levels. If we use the analytical grid drawn from Bolt (2016) and Harding (1988) suggested above, we can identify tropes on symbolic, structural, and individual levels in vocal performance. Singers in improvised performance can take on new roles and functions which to them are usually not available in classical performance discourse, (for instance by the agencies of their voice *Fachs*). In the project ON, 2012, the performative, deconstructive and creative potential of CCVI came to the fore, in an exploration of the relations between character and singer, where embodying and 'envoicing' these roles was one of the core objectives (Wilén, 2013b).

If we consider the analytical use of tropes in a musical context, tropes relate to musical or structural figures, or patterns. By adding these interpretations of the word to one another, the tropes can serve as a useful link between the theoretical and

practical layers in CCVI. Tropes point to the potential to alter, problematise or critically address the relation between signified and signifier within a discourse. The interactional (de)construction(s) of vocal, musical and physical action tropes in CCVI can be compared to how Heikinheimo uses activity theory in his study of musical interaction between performing students and their teachers (2009). Negotiations of the emergent musical materials take place on many levels, by the dialogic play with inner images, cultural and idiomatic musical and performative codes and traditions, often by the use and development of new tropes. Heikinheimo (2009) describes how an object such as musical activity can be seen as a cultural entity or a cultural means, a crucial relational link between the actions of the individual and the 'untouchable societal structure' (p. 66). The meaning of the joint object is constantly being negotiated, or mediated through the interplay between the actors in the situation. 'In other words, the identification of an object is always the crucial starting point in analysing and examining any activity' (Heikinheimo, 2009, p. 69).

Singers and instrumentalists individually use and negotiate tropes as objects, ways of mediating meaning and agency inside the performative situations, both on narrative, collegial and rhetorical levels, thereby using and transforming cultural artefacts generated through generations of classical operatic performance.

Humour as dialogical, performative trope

As noted in Wilén, 2013a, humour is often present in opera improvisation (and sometimes lyrical improvisation) performances. Along with metaphors, irony is defined as one of the central linguistic tropes. According to the Swedish national encyclopedia (NE, n.d.), humour is founded on the collision between two or more human rule systems. A person taking part of a situation searches for information by relating to various rule systems (or discourses). If several rule systems are addressed, a psychological tension builds up. If it is dissolved, the surplus energy can be channelled in laughter if the person realises that s/he manages the situation and both of the systems (ibid).

Seen from a post-structural perspective, humour has a deconstructive power, challenging the concept of authority and source, as in Bauman's (2004) description of a burlesque character in Mexican tradition. In performance, the Hermit repeats and distorts the lines of his part as read up aloud by a prompter on the side of the stage with a parodic distance, with the aim of challenging and inverting the authoritative power of the prompter's source utterance.

In a study on humour, Rothbart (2007) explored the circumstances that point to unreasonable aspects of a situation, which in turn lead to reactions such as laughter or anxiousness. An individual becomes aware of something that is sudden, unexpected or unreasonable. Rothbart outlines how the person then asks her/himself: 1) Can the stimulus be dangerous? 2) Is the stimulus valued as a serious threat to my own knowledge, or is it fun or inconsistent? 3) Can this 'wrong' be solved? Rothbart concludes that unreasonable events presented in a safe and playful environment more often lead to laughter and possible changes in the actions of the individuals, who then approach each other. Extremely unexpected or intense stimuli presented in less safe environments lead to anxiousness, rejection or even aggressive reactions between individuals.

The notion that laughter has a vital function in managing social relationships and situations is confirmed by Warner-Garcia (2014), who argues that laughter is used on a relational level of interaction, but not necessarily on the content level. In her study of a group of friends in a social situation, laughter appears as a reaction at the peak of a relational disagreement between individuals. She draws on Goffman's concept of *framing* (see below) and interprets this disagreement as a frame created by the participants, which can be avoided through the use of laughter, thereby making a shift from a serious frame into 'a more non-serious and harmonious frame' (p. 160).

In his history of laughter, Bakhtin (Fyhr, 2007) underlines the dialogue as central in language. Dialogue is a way for us humans to search for others' perspectives on our own consciousness. Understanding others, not defined as strange or hostile, is our responsibility and a prerequisite for us to understand ourselves. A central theme for Bakhtin was the conflict between open and secluded systems. With examples from ancient and Medieval carnivals, Bakhtin (2007) defines laughter as a radical practice, aiming to subvert social hierarchies by creating situations where roles and social positions could be changed. In popular culture, laughter appears as a deliberating force that can mirror and deconstruct the dogmatic language of power systems (ibid).

Bakhtin (2007) describes the popular laughter and carnival culture of the Medieval as aiming to be experienced by the whole people, from every social class, and normal laws were upheaved. The carnival aimed to dissolve limits and borders, such as between stage and reality. The carnival grotesque and parody pointed to contradictions in given systems and hierarchies, putting the low on high and vice versa, thereby reflecting transitions in human life, such as between darkness and light, life and death or winter and spring. Laughter had a liberating and embodying

universal power, where people could laugh together at themselves and their fear of the authoritative power, death and the passing of time. A central part of the grotesque and laughter was degradation, where the sublime, spiritual and abstract was brought down to a material and physical level: degrading though materialization, but without exclusion. This process brought a transformative stage, as the renewed, distanced perspective on self and other brought a sense of rebirth (ibid).

This kind of humour differs from a modern conception of parody and satire (Fyhr, 2007). Debasing others by placing oneself outside and in opposition in relation to that which is being mocked makes an experience of totality in the comical view on the world impossible, and the negative becomes a partial appearance (ibid.). According to Fyhr (2007), the initial central connection to laughter, where the social, the physical and the comical were considered as a whole, was not appreciated in the later classical aesthetic systems.

The principle of laughter and the carnivalesque sensation of the world, which form the ground for the grotesque, destroy the philistine gravity and every claim on a timeless meaning and absolute validity in the human conception of necessity; it liberates the human consciousness, human thought and imaginary power in favour of new possibilities. (Fyhr, 2007, p. 57, my translation)⁵⁰

The artistic practice of Dario Fo exemplifies how contemporary political satire can be created by vocal and physical characterization in farce and by drawing on performance techniques from the commedia tradition on a high artistic level. On the contrary, his portrayals often drew on the grotesque, bringing the subversive performative tradition described by Bakhtin above alive, through a physical, artistic embodiment.

In this way, humour and parody as phenomena play on dialogical, or intertextual, relationships between systems, meanings, interpretations and individuals, in the context of texts and social situations. Irony is an ethical trope that lies close to humour, in its postmodern form unwilling to take sides, but rather displaying the disparity between appearance and reality (Rutland, 1996, p. 6). Critchley (2002) describes humour as a practice that plays with shared values, by members of the same social world, and Jägerfeld (2017) views humour as a possible critical method:

⁵⁰ In Swedish: Skattets princip och karnevalens förnimmelse av världen, som ligger till grund för grotesken, tillintetgör det inskränkta allvaret och varje anspråk på en tidlös betydelse och absolut giltighet i föreställningarna om nödvändigheten; de befriar det mänskliga medvetandet, människans tanke och inbillningskraft till förmån för nya möjligheter. (Fyhr 2007, p. 57)

Humour can also be a way to spot ourselves or the surrounding world from another perspective. An unexpected joke can tear a little hole in the weave that constitutes our usual view on the world and suddenly make us aware of our own oblique or illogical way of seeing things. (Jägerfeld, 2017 n.p., my translation)⁵¹

In *Epic and novel* (1981) Bakhtin sees the novel as a way of pointing to differences between meaning and utterance, by dramatizing the gaps between the telling of something and what is told, thereby experimenting with narrative, discursive and social asymmetries and discrepancies (Holquist, 1989, p. xxviii). This comes close to the performative perspective that I apply in this project. The relationship between traditional vocal classical canonical performance as a literary system and the collaborative, multi-vocal CCVI practice resembles Bakhtin's outline: 'The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 5).

Perhaps it is not surprising that humour is common in opera improvisation performance situations; it can be used to address and include the audience socially, and it questions and subverts hegemonic norms of classical vocal performance by the use of tropes portrayed with intertextual and interperformative dimensions.

Framing and subject position

In order to compare and discuss the position of the singer in terms of presence and agency during CCVI performance and classical vocal repertoire performance, I use the sociological concept of *frame*, as suggested by Goffman (1974). According to Goffman, human experience is defined by one or more social frames (humanly constructed, cultural) and/or natural frames (constructed by other factors). Thus, frames define elements that in turn define a situation:

⁵¹ In Swedish: Humör kan också vara ett sätt att få syn på oss själva eller omvärlden från ett annat håll. Ett oväntat skämt kan riva ett litet hål i den väv som utgör vår vanliga syn på världen och plötsligt göra oss medvetna om vårt eget skeva eller ologiska synsätt. (Jägerfeld, n.d., n.p.)

I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events- at least social ones- and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify. (Goffman, 1974, p. 10-11)

An experience can then be *keyed* by further frameworks which indicate how to understand the actions taking place within the frame, or social framework, such as play, or ceremony. The keying takes place in a constant flow of physical and vocal (speech) acts, which shape the context, or the situation, while at the same time being shaped by its prerequisites (Robinson, 2006). This is a central notion in performative pragmatics and points to the fact that social frameworks are not static, since:

[...] everything we do is a rekeying of something. Every social framework is constantly being rekeyed. 'Invoking' a social framework rekeys it. Even 'recognizing' a social framework rekeys it. In an important sense social frameworks only 'exist' through their rekeyings: it's only by being rekeyed, reperformed, over and over, each time in more or less the same way but with new twists, new spins, that it even becomes possible to speak of a social framework, to recognise it as a repeating pattern. (Robinson, 2009, p. 11)

A pragmatic understanding of language concerns how a speaker conceives of a situation, one's own and other people's actions and earlier utterances and actions made in the situation (Nettelbladt, 2013). Nettelbladt suggests a model for a pragmatic analysis of language actions, containing four dimensions (here somewhat simplified):

1. Interaction and turn-taking
2. What is said and intended
3. Sequentiality and coherence in content
4. Type of activities (relevance) (ibid., p. 382)

In all these processes it is central to understand several parallel layers of vocal action: when to talk and listen (1) what is being said and how it is intended (2 and 3) and in what context it is uttered (4). Speakers constantly shift between the specific utterance and the global as part of a wider context.⁵² This constant oscillation between a detailed part and the whole resembles Forssell's description (2015) of his compositional process, as mentioned above.

⁵² For an outline of the four pragmatic dimensions of language and their correlates in opera improvisational processes, please see Wilén (2015).

Rekeying a social framework, or situation can generate *transformation*, where an original event or type of activity in some way is altered. Auslander (2006) calls for a 'performer-centered theory of musical performance' (p. 103). He focuses on 'musicians as social beings' (p. 101) not only interacting as musicians in performance, but also performing their *persona(s)*, their identities in musical performance as social context(s). In order to perceive a sonic experience as a live music recording, three stages of framing agreed on by a social group are required, where the third stage includes a transformation of the original event:

1. Music frame: the musician's playing is perceived as music
2. Performance frame: the musician's playing is perceived/keyed as performance before an audience rather than a practice for musicians themselves
3. Recording frame: the live event is mediated or transformed into a recording, representing the performance. This third frame decides the status of the activity in terms of 'common frames of reference' between performers and audience (ibid, p. 105)

Drawing on Goffman's theory, Auslander notes that performers and audience form two groups of actors whose negotiations of the referential understanding is central for the interpretation and understanding of a performance as event.⁵³ Transforming a social framework consequently means changing the discourses, roles or subject positions. Frames can be seen as performative prerequisites, specifying how the agency of the performer is dependent on the genre and the performance format, both according to in which keys the music is produced/created, and to the relations to colleagues, audience and significant others. This affects which *subject position* the performer experiences him/herself to have in the current situation. This allows for an understanding of music performance that foregrounds the relations between performers and audience by articulating the frames and conventions of the genre. Then, a musical work is part of the performer's tool box, or the 'expressive equipment musicians employ in the production of personae' (p. 118).

CCVI can be understood as a genre where the musico-dramatic material is constructed as result of the ongoing dialogues and negotiations between performers, audience and tradition, a pragmatic understanding of how these musical processes develop as musical conversations, where vocal and musical tools are used by the

⁵³ The section on humour in opera improvisation below aims to communicate experiences of how such negotiations can take place within an improvisatory performance frame, where laughter is used as an oral communicative tool between performer and audience.

singers in order to change subject positions, playing with the framings of the classical performance situation and its personae. According to Davies (2000) a subject position

incorporates both a conceptual repertoire and a location for persons within the structure of rights for those who use that repertoire. Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. (Davies, 2000, p. 89)

Auslander's (2006) analytical model discussed above is also useful in a discussion of how documentation for artistic research can be collected and analysed. The most common way to mediate musical performances is into recordings from one or more cameras (and/or audio), placed to represent an audience perspective. Thus, the recording is made in order to mediate the sonic experience as a live music recording. In Western classical and contemporary art music, this forms part of a strong tradition where the performance is considered as a materialised interpretation of a musical work, an aesthetic object, where the main objective is to mediate a specific piece of music to listeners. The recording is 'normally' considered as *the same* as the musical performance (and the written or even improvised musical work) and can be evaluated aesthetically. In CCVI, the improvised performance and the material that emanate from it are the result of the communicative processes that take place on stage and in relation to the present audience. The aim is not to interpret a musical text in order to create an aesthetic object, but to take part in and respond to the ongoing communicative processes between performers and spectators. Documentations of CCVI are sometimes - mistakenly - perceived as mediating the (whole) communicative, sonic and visual experience. Since this project investigates the social and performative dimensions of improvisation processes, the aim is not to evaluate the documentations as aesthetic objects. Consequently, I describe and portray the improvisations in the project in several ways apart from sound and video productions of works, such as inner descriptions inspired by creative writing, interview excerpts in text, and action analysis and IAM analyses.

The singer's subject position in performance

The analytical tools discussed above can be used in order to distinguish prerequisites for a classical singer. Framing and keying is useful in articulating how the

performance prerequisites of a genre are set up, and subject position can be used when describing a singer's agency in a performance situation. However, in concert and opera performance, interactional relations to the other performers can differ. In order to trace these differences, I use the concept of persona, although in another setting than employed by Auslander above.

In a classical opera repertoire performance, the singer embodies a musico-dramatic character, lending her body and voice to be interpreted as the character (Wilén, 2013b). As repertoire performance is framed by the discourse of the work concept (Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication b), this embodiment is carried out inside this discourse, which in turn affects the subject position of the singer in relation to a number of actors and factors in the classical performance field. Auslander discusses a classical concert performance as a social transaction between audience and performer, where the understanding and evaluational codes of the event (which is very conventional in nature) are set long before they meet in the hall of the performance. The way classical performers enter the stage, and approach each other, the audience and the music also sets frames for how the performance is to be understood in a work concept oriented performance. For instance, in a symphony concert 'the musicians present themselves in a low-key manner, suggesting seriousness rather than showmanship. They direct attention to what they do, not who they are, and expect the audience to follow suit' (Auslander, 2006, p. 107).

These performative frames set expectations and delimitations for the agency of both the performers and the audience in the performance situation. This performance frame differs from a rock concert, where the genre to a great extent presents itself through performance with a focus on the performers (Middleton, 2000). Middleton notes that vocal practices where the performers themselves create their own musical material in performance or work processes that derive from performance rather than compositional practice, offer performers possibilities to take a critical song role position, as they relate both to their listeners and their material. This interface goes in line with Auslander definition of a musical persona: 'a performed presence that is neither an overtly fictional character nor simply equivalent to the performer's 'real' identity' (2006, p. 102, writer's quotes). As CCVI is a practice where the performers create their material, this similarly offers a possibility for a critical position.

In general, the position, or professional role of the classical singer does not offer much critical agency, due to the strong performative norms and frames of the genre. The position and agency of the Western classical singer is heavily affected by the work concept tradition, and several scholars (Cotton, 2007; Gvion, 2015; Hemsley, 2000; Sandgren, 2008; Unander Scharin, 2014) note that the singer is trained into

embodying a certain artistic role in line with a voice *Fach* (Cotton, 2007). The artistic aim of this singer is to perform the repertoire given in the *Fach* in accordance with the expectations of significant others from both the classical market and the artistic and institutional hierarchies, who evaluate the performance of the singer.⁵⁴ Potter (1988) describes the space for physical expression in classical singing as restrained: emotional expressions should be showed in the face only, with an exception for opera. In ‘the quasi-religious nature’ (p. 183), of vocal concert performance, other gestures are restricted to the minimum.

A very simplified schematization of how I perceive a classical singer’s position in relation to the musical work in the discourse of the work concept (Goehr, 2007) is represented in the following model, where the singer creates an interpretation of the musical work within the framings set by conductor, coach and director. According to this model (Figure 2) a classical singer in opera repertoire performance relates to a number of actors and factors in performance:

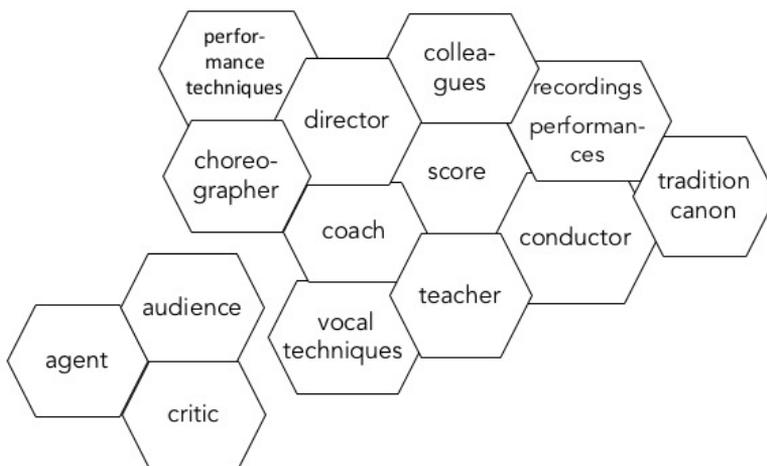


Figure 2:
Actors and factors in opera repertoire performance

In CCVI, the subject position of the singer is different, since there is no musical work to take into account. Compared to the number of agents outlined above, in CCVI, the singer faces many fewer agents in a performance. One significant difference as compared to classical repertoire performance is the possibility of dialogue with the audience, who can play a significant role in negotiating the

⁵⁴ Cotton (2007), Gvion (2015), Hemsley (2000), Sandgren (2008), Unander Scharin (2014).

contents of the performance, both by responding to questions from the performers, and through their spontaneous reactions during performance (for instance, laughter). During the performance, the emergent material is created in the interaction between the performers and in dialogue with the audience. As classically trained singers, the performers stand in dialogue with the classical tradition in terms of performance traditions and the musical canon. But here, the improviser's relations to tradition are materialised through the creation of new musico-dramatic material with the intuitive use of musical tropes and in relation to certain vocal and musical action dimensions, as will be discussed in the result chapter below. In CCVI performance (Figure 3) the actors and factors are considerably fewer than above.⁵⁵

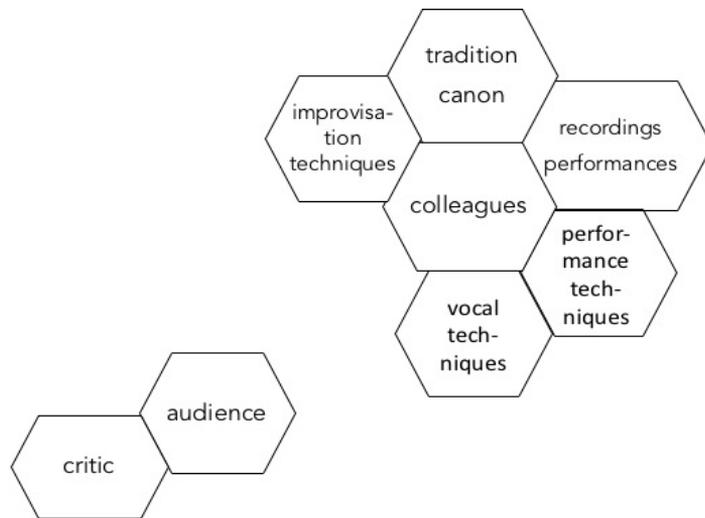


Figure 3:
Actors and factors in opera improvisation performance

The performing singer as persona(e)

In a section about self-representation, Dimbleby and Burton (1999) describe how human beings adapt and choose parts of themselves to present to others, depending on the situation. They conclude that we stage performances through specific personae: ‘we enact a performance through a persona’ (my translation from Swedish, p. 67). The persona is the character through which we communicate and interact

⁵⁵ This simplified example addresses CCVI that is improvised without relating to repertoire, as is the case in some projects presented in this material.

with others (p. 68) and the choice of persona signals how the situation is to be conceived.

Edward Cone's (1974, 2008) distinctions between musical and vocal persona in opera and song performance shows his traditional stance in relation to vocal repertoire, since he mainly focuses on the musical material.

If the singer in a cappella singing is being aware of music, words and every aspect of the song, s/he represents the musical persona: "an intelligence in the act if thinking through words and music alike. (Cone, 2008, p. 230)

The singer represents the vocal persona. It is the protagonist, the character or the role who 'is' unconscious of singing. Since the voice is such a strong medium it dominates a sounding situation such as a song or an aria. It is as if the vocal persona composes the part, not being aware of that s/he sings.

The vocal persona is the protagonist, the character or the role. Since the voice is such a strong medium, it dominates a sounding situation such as a song or an aria. It is as if the vocal persona composes the part, not being aware that s/he sings.

The singer is the actual, living embodiment of the vocal protagonist – he is the persona turned into a person; and we insist on a modicum of congruence within the framework of our usual stage conventions. (Ibid, 1974, p. 23)

As the singer in performance embodies the vocal persona, s/he is not private on stage, since all the singer's doings are interpreted as parts of the vocal persona's actions or expressions. The ideal case is when the singer as person and the vocal persona merge. However, Cone (who seems not to have visited improvisation performances) puts in doubt that he would ever get to experience a singer creating her/his own part in performance:

The physical presence and the vitality of the singer turn the persona of the poetic-musical text into an actual, immediate, living being: the person of the singer invests the persona of the song with personality. If the impersonation is successful, if the illusion is complete, we hear this embodied persona as 'composing' his part- as living through the experience of the song. The vocal persona may be of various kinds - protagonist, character, etc. but, barring the unlikely possibility that we now ever witness the actual creation of natural song by its composer—performer, the persona is never identical with the singer. (Ibid, p. 62)

This is in line with how Abbate (1991) perceives the voice as the sole centre of the listener's attention in vocal music: "The sound of the singing voice becomes, as it

were, a 'voice-object' and the sole center [sic] for the listener's attention' (p. 10). She underlines how only a very thin surface separates the voice as object and the voice connected to the performer. Fischer-Lichte (2008) sees the classical singing voice - especially at high ranges - as exuding presence, since the voice is being detached from language in its semiotic sense. These processes, actually basic in classical singing performance practice, have been continuously focused by theatre and performance art since the performative turn in the 1960s, often by experimental use of electronics.

Not only does the voice unite tonality, corporeality, and spatiality so that the performance's materiality constantly regenerates itself within it. Through it, the bodily being-in-the-world of the articulating subject expresses him/herself and addresses those who hear him/her in their own bodily being-in-the-world. The voice builds a bridge and establishes a relationship between two subjects. It fills the space between them sees the classical singing voice, especially at high ranges, as exuding presence. (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 130)

Discussing the role of the singer in performance in context of the ground-breaking work of opera singer, improviser and composer Catherine Berberian, Verstraete (2015) claims that she as performing, improvising composer in concert performances of her piece *Stripsody* enacts many roles, meaning vocal personae. Her exceptional vocal flexibility and her artistic persona becomes very present through the materiality and individuality of her performance, claiming space in the performance situation at the same time as the vocal personae of the musical material. This leads to that 'the perception of various vocal personas as part of a representational world decenters [sic] an assumed composer's voice as virtual author (or authorial presence) within the composition' (Verstratete, 2015, p. 81).

An instrumentalist on stage on the other hand, does not embody his/her musical part physically. Rather, it is through the sound that the instrumental persona is embodied, so that the pianist as agent conveys a symbolic presence of a virtual persona. According to Cone, a pianist should never try to bring herself forth, as a singer must do. 'Sounds are not a means of mediation by which we are enabled to hear music; they constitute the reality of music, and they effect the realization of its persona' (Cone, 1974, p. 106).

The cherry on top of the musical hierarchy as outlined by Cone (1974), much rejected by Abbate (1991) as 'centering [sic] and hegemonic authorial image' (p. 11), is the composer, He is the complete musical persona, whose voice is compared to the voice of God, for performers to obey. The pianist who accompanies the singer in a song performance can be seen as the representative of the composer, symbolised

by the use of the score. However unfitting this sacred metaphor may appear, Cone's model might be useful for an analysis of vocal and instrumental performance, both in repertoire and improvisation, as we shall see.

Fischer-Lichte (2008) suggests an analytical perspective which takes the performative event as point of departure. Here, both the audience's live experiences of the performer as oscillating between the representational layer (of a character, or the semiotic body) and her/his presence in the actual situation in the room, are taken into account. These moments of transition from one order of perception to another are characterised by a destabilization, where the perceiving subjects can experience being caught in a liminal state, 'betwixt and between' (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 148).

The aesthetic, interpretational understandings of the performer's persona and body lie close to Frith's (1996, pp. 211-212) three (overlapping) dimensions of how the singer's roles in performance can be articulated:

- 1) Performing the role as a star personality
- 2) Performing the song personality role in the lyrics of the song at hand
- 3) Being present as a physical, real body on stage

Drawing from the discussion of the performance as a social situation, consequently, the framings (and/or transformations) of the genre provide a preunderstanding of how a singer in performance is understood and interpreted by the audience and the fellow performers. As Auslander (2006) notes, the persona of the performer is a social construct that varies depending on the performance situation rather than on his/her individual personality. Here the investment made by the audience into the performative situation plays a decisive role in the identity formation and role-taking of the vocal performer. In this work, vocal persona will be used for the subject position where the singer represents a character or a text (Cone, 1974; 2008). Since the music is here improvised and created by the partakers themselves, I will use the concept of musical persona to describe the shared, collective subject positions of the improvisers as musicians taking the musical whole into account. The musician in the subject position of communicating through sound (without words) will here be referred to as agent,⁵⁶ and his/her sound to as instrumental persona.

⁵⁶ Cone's (1974) definition of an agent in musical performance refers to the role of an instrument in a musical material, and thus differs from mine.

How the oscillation between representation and presence in opera performance can be analysed is exemplified by Clemens Risi⁵⁷ who sees the interplay between these layers as vital to a performative analytic model in opera. He described an experience of a *Lohengrin* performance in two interpretational layers: representation/narration and presence. The first, representational or narrative layer consisted of his reading of the *Regie* concept, and the symbolic meanings of the characters (as vocal persona) and their actions. The title role singer was slightly indisposed, and Risi interpreted some subtle signs of uncertainty and flaws of his vocal performance as indications of the human presence of the singer as person, adding a meta-layer to Risi's experience as viewer. Ethnersson develops a performative perspective on opera performance with the score of *Tosca* by Puccini as point of departure. Through an analysis of two contrasting tenor parts in *Tosca*, the dramatic Cavaradossi and the almost comical Spoletta, Ethnersson points to performative aspects of Puccini's music in terms of theatricality. As the orchestral part in Spoletta's arietta vividly underlines the events he describes in a comical way, the interpretation of the drama turns into presentation by vocal and physical characterization, where the character tenor becomes the acting subject rather than the dramatic character (or vocal persona) Spoletta. Axel Englund analysed opera productions of Handel's *Rinaldo*, Wagner's *Parsifal* and Berg's *Wozzeck*. In the productions S/M was used as aesthetic trope in a hyperbolic (exaggerated) play with power structures, as an interplay between eroticism and power, where borders between fiction and reality were transgressed. Englund noted that the use of S/M in operatic performance productions could also be seen as a theatrical trope for the audience's experience of being 'penetrated' by the opera voices as intense sensual experiences.

The role of the character (or in concert performance, the vocal persona) has long been dominating and evaluated as the highest form of artistic vocal performance, where the singers' bodies represent the textual aspects of a musical work, often as a dramatic character given by the musical work at hand, in combination with the qualities connected to the singer's *Voice Fach*.⁵⁸ If we compare this way of perceiving the actor with how Cone elevates the perception of the singer as first and foremost vocal persona, it is clear that this approach derives from the artistic status distribution of the work concept. In opera and vocal classical performance this is a well-known 'problem', often framed as the material presence of the voices and

⁵⁷ Clemens Risi, Johanna Ethnersson and Axel Englund presented papers at an international opera symposium at Stockholm University on June 30th - July 1st, 2017, *Opera and performance, taking stock and looking ahead*, where performativity in Western opera was one of the central themes.

⁵⁸ For a further discussion of the role of the *Voice Fach* in relation to a singer's performance, please see Wilén 2013b.

bodies as being in the world of the singers threaten to take space from the composition, or the performance concept as main focus. As Goehr puts it, the performer's main responsibility is to 'comply as perfectly as possible with the scores composers provided' (2007, p. 231). Fischer-Lichte (2008) outlines (bodily) representation in stage performance as being part of the grand narratives of literary texts, here the musical scores, where the content of the representation exhorted controlling and authoritative mechanisms, rather rigid and fixed in their meanings (p. 147). Consequently, an improvising singer who steps out of her/his role as character to start a dialogue with the audience (to join as performers), by asking them for help to create the performance at hand, is breaking this classical performance norm by rekeying it into an alternative classical performance event, where the prerequisites of improvisation renegotiates the frames, by deconstructing the expected traditional roles of performer, spectator and author.

Action and situation in vocal stage performance

As noted above, in CCVI the improvisers perform in and through interaction in different contexts and on different levels. In opera improvisation we often create longer operas which are inspired by realistic acting, whereas creating circumstances of the fictional situation is an important part of the work. The technique of situating a vocal persona as a point of a departure is central also in most of the improvised performances that form part of this project.⁵⁹ During my participation in the course, the theory and practice of theatre (TTP) at the Theatre Academy in Malmö in 2010, I became acquainted with theatre acting analysis techniques from a theoretical and practical perspective. One of the central techniques in this work was action analysis. This has given me insights that are useful in delineating some of the interactional musico-dramatic structures of CCVI. In order to discuss the concept of action from operatic and theatrical contexts, I will also address some central issues of modern improvised theatre, which lie closely to the musico-dramatic work in this project.

Rynell (2008) concludes that a significant part of Western drama, from the ancient Greek plays until the plays of Lars Norén can be included in the following description of drama with action:

⁵⁹ An important exception is Vernissage, 2015, where no words were used in the vocal improvisations.

... a narrative, conceived as a written text intended for scenic use, a text which is fictive, mimetic in some sense and has the form of a contextualization of assumed human actions, verbal and nonverbal. These actions, carried out by fictive *dramatis personae*, are intended to be acted in real time by living persons- actors- in front of a public. The actor then embodies not only the sayings and doings of a fictive person, but also the background, situation and objectives of this person, as well as of his sayings and doings. (2008, p. 25)

This description shows many similarities with the agreement that opera singers in repertoire and improvisation have made, consciously and unconsciously on different levels, with each other, the musicians and the audience. The most common way of acting in opera repertoire as well as in opera improvisation can be described as action inspired by realism. This is based on the concept of mimesis (Wilén, 2013b) and developed through a structure of agreements in staged performance. It is a system where a sign, in this case the character (or the vocal persona) corresponds with a signifier, in this case the singer embodying the character. The audience is present in the room, but not within the scenic, or communicative dramatic situation, but rather a rhetoric situation.

As noted above, the relation between sign and signifier in vocal performance is problematic, since a realistic framing codes a number of events as 'natural' while they are in fact a result of naturalised values and norms in a certain context (Diamond, 1997). Realistic acting is a result of a development in theatre during the 19th century. Stanislavskij developed his psychotechnique, where a character's inner life and lived traumas were recreated by the actor in her/his long work with deeply analysed stage actions (see below). Diamond resembles stage realism to positivism and the mimesis of the true self: 'stage realism is mimesis's positivist moment' (2008, vii), claiming that mimesis is a recurring practice in history, coloured by different understandings. Aristotle described mimesis as a way to choose the actions that, if they were portrayed 'correctly', could show the way to universal ethical values. During the 19th century nature was seen as model for the universal order, which was to be reproduced through mimesis. 'But the mimesis of this 'nature', in its production and reception, will be fully marked by the political, literary, and gender ideologies /.../ and the social context.' (Diamond, 1997, p. viii). There is a striking resemblance between the view of how an actor is supposed to impersonate a role and how a classical singer is expected to impersonate a vocal persona in repertoire. I see a great potential in how the role of the vocal persona in classical persona can be problematised in the context of CCVI, by the use of vocal actions and tropes, as will be discussed further below.

Presence and focus

In dramatic improvisation, perhaps the most vital part is to focus on the present asking ourselves as improvisers, 'how can I make my colleague(s) appear brilliant?' The relations are at the core of the performance and need to be carefully considered on stage in order to create something together. This is central in modern theatre improvisation. In Vilc's (2015) words:

If all actors present ... 'make each other look good', and take turns in doing it, step by step, action by action, reaction by reaction, a situation builds up and a story develops. ... While blocking, the actors get stuck and it is as frustrating for the audience as it is for the performers. (p. 31)

This focus is also underlined by Sjöström (2007) who stresses the importance of the actor being present and aware in the moment of action, and has a focus outside of herself, on the other actors' actions. The dramatist, director and theatre pedagogue Keith Johnstone, whose influence on the development of the modern improvisation theatre can hardly be exaggerated, worked closely with Samuel Beckett during his early years at the Royal Court Theatre in the 1940s, developing the new genre. A piece of advice in a letter from Beckett came to influence the work for years to come.

A theatre stage is an area of maximum verbal presence and maximum corporeal presence. Any dimming of the one or the other, or of the one by the other, is anti-theatrical. (in Robbins Dudeck, 2013, p. 36)

In his work with opera singers in the opera *Rigoletto* by Verdi, Stanislavskij uses the assumption that the singers situate themselves as characters by constructing fictional relations and situations where they address the other characters with their vocal actions (Rumjantsev, 1993). Stanislavskij underlined the importance of using human actions and speaking in real life, which, interestingly, connects to Galilei's view on singing in the 16th century (Bergström, 2000). This method is what I refer to as realistic acting. The staged interaction builds on the fact that the singer creates fictional situations and relations, by believing in the agreements and circumstances created through the word 'if' (Stanislavskij, 1977, p. 69). Stanislavskij states the importance of addressing a physical object on stage at all times. 'Istället för att sjunga raktut i luften och följaktligen – för ingen alls. Lägg på minnet att på scenen får det inte gå en enda minut utan objekt' (as quoted by Rumjantsev, 1993, p. 115). The work with relations can be divided into three parts:

1. To have visual contact with the object
2. To adapt to the object and investigate how you can communicate your way of thinking in the most convincing way
3. To discover the responsive actions of the object, that is, how it reacts on your thoughts

This lies close to Spolin's (1999) point of view. She notes that very close group relationships are required in improvised theatre performance, mainly due to the fact that all the material is emanating from common agreements and the interactions that actually occur in the performance situations. She remarks that the involvement into the environment is the foundation of any acting (and learning) experience. When we as actors engage in solving occurring problems using 'bits and pieces of ourselves' (p. 4) while functioning as an organic whole, moments of personal freedom occur. In the solution of relating to framed experiences and relations set up by the outspoken specific techniques and games at hand, the improvising vocal actors highly involve themselves. In these processes, intuitive, spontaneous reactions are released in 'the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly' (ibid.). Even so, these crucial intuitive levels in creative and learning situations are often neglected. When the problems (or performance challenges) are solved, energy is released, while the individual and the group identities transcend, strengthen and grow by the joint integrated experiences. Experiencing is penetration into the environment, total organic involvement with it. This means involvement on all levels: intellectual, physical, and intuitive. (p. 3)

Spolin's view on the engagement in theatre improvisational processes lies close to how Csikszentmihalyi (1999) describes moments of creative flow: a deep concentration around a delimited group of sensual impressions or stimuli, that is being perceived as interesting by an individual (Csikszentmihalyi , p. 41).

Intention, circumstances, vocal and musical actions

Action and situation are central concepts in acting techniques today (Rynell, 2008; Sjöström, 2007). A realistic/naturalistic acting style dominates in a majority of musico-dramatic fiction today, such as films, television and even opera. This acting style is inspired by the acting techniques described and taught by the Russian actor and teacher Konstantin Stanislavskij. Within the situation, the actor needs to extract the circumstances of the character's position, by asking questions such as: Where am I? What time is it? What do I want? Which relations do we have? What am I

doing? (after Rynell, 2008, p. 34, p. 48) and other, such as What relations do we have?⁶⁰ Actors use these questions to identify themselves with a role and to act within the circumstances of fictional scenic situations.

Stanislavskij tells singers to ‘act orally’ (handla muntligen’, my translation, Rumjantsev, 1993, p. 83, my translation] as a way of focusing their understanding of a situation, the object and how to relate to these. In action analysis, a main aim can be ‘to read the play in terms of actions... and to find out the intentions behind them’. (Rynell, 2008, p. 45). This is a way of bridging ‘the gap between text and practical work’ (ibid, p. 46).

Bergström (2000) comes close to this when defining a vocal action in repertoire opera as a singer’s way of using a tension between words and music:

I propose that the dramatic action specific to opera is *vocal action* and that this action is a result of exploiting the tensions between ‘the verbal and vocal aspects’, which I should define as the tension between the prosody of the text and the melody line. (Bergström, 2001, p. 89, writer’s italics and quotes)

This approach actually lies close to Small’s (1988) simple question in order to track musicking as social process(es): ‘What’s really going on here?’ (p. 10). This question is very similar to the central question in action analysis of text in theatre ‘What is X doing?’, as well as in defining an opera improviser’s actions in a dramatic situation as described above. It is also a central question in Goffman’s (1974) conceptualization of framing as organizing human experience, which will be discussed further below.

Rynell (2008) describes the work of the actor in terms of cognitive strategies. He notes that relating to the situation has been a central issue in Western acting through history. According to Johnstone (1999), dramatic action is a product of interaction, which he defines as ‘a shift in the balance between two people’ (p. 77) where it is clear that the relation between them is changed by the action.

A repertoire singer’s work is partly, but not always, based on situated (or realistic) acting, which the following quote from Gefors (2011) may indicate. Gefors here describes how abstract elements can come into repertoire opera performance at any time, as the flow of events can be broken or their speed may be changed, steered by the composer’s view of emotional tension in that which is experienced:

⁶⁰ These are vital questions in the work in opera improvisation, as noted above.

... handlingens flöde kan brytas upp och stanna helt, stegas fram eller löpa nästan normalt. Förloppet styrs av tonsättarens blick för känsloladdning och förtätning i det omedelbart upplevda. (Ibid, p. 70)

This description also lies close to what can be the case in song repertoire, as the combination of poetry and music often brings about inner images, emotional experiences and atmospheres, though these are not set in dramatic situations.

Praxis and mythos perspectives

Are there different ways of defining action on stage? First, there is a difference between the action in the moment and in action of a story as a whole. Sjöström (2007) argues, referring to Aristotle, that there are two different perspectives of the word: first, the contents of a story, or intrigue, and, second, the physical actions that a person enacts. I similarly choose to define action in two fictional layers: (i) an overall narrative or dramaturgical perspective, a mythos perspective, and (ii) an individually situated perspective, a praxis perspective. In both of these perspectives, the interactions and artistic negotiations with the other improvisers are crucial for the development, as will be discussed further below. The mythos perspective is central to me as an opera improviser. Sjöström (2007) describes the role in a play as following a road, heading towards a goal through actions, which are constantly tested and sometimes changed during the work of a stage setting.

Rollens väg genom pjäsen är vägen mot ett mål. Självklart kan denna väg, liksom målet, variera mellan olika uppsättningar av en pjäs. På samma sätt omprövar skådespelaren ständigt dessa mål och vilka handlingar som krävs för att uppnå dem under ett uppsättningsarbete: de ligger aldrig konstanta. (2008, p. 151)

I see great similarities between this and the practice of the vocal improviser. The improviser changes between praxis and mythos perspectives, where the former is to act in a situation and make decisions that are based on the perspective of the role: What do I want? What do I do to achieve this? Taking the mythos perspective for me as an opera improviser is to see to the longer story and to take actions in relation to this. What do I perceive that the story and the dynamic development of the opera needs here and now? To keep the agreements made on stage when it comes to developing a narrative is crucial for operatic and lyrical improvisers, both in opera and concert performance. This is a basic principle for improvisers, used in professional improvised theatre, where returning to previously presented ideas is crucial to the whole (Vilc, 2015). 'Advance the narrative through connecting the element already established' (p. 28).

The pianist often plays a vital role in keeping musical ideas and contexts in the improvisations. Obviously, in opera improvisation the improviser creates the material, which differs from an actor's work in a play. In this way, the contents of an improvisation are created as a result of the ongoing negotiations inside and between the improvisers. This shows striking similarities to Forssell's (2015) description of how he as opera composer constantly shifts between the detail of the musical moment and the conception of the composition as a whole: 'the playback head perspective' ('tonhuvudperspektivet', p. 196, my translation) and 'the score perspective' ('partiturspektivet', *ibid.*, my translation). According to Forssell, it is vital for a composer to be able to master and process these two perspectives simultaneously. In order to find ways to analyse and communicate these interactional aspects of the improvisational performance, I have investigated the concepts of vocal and musical action as a starting point, which will be discussed further below.

Situation, impulse and experience

One of the main differences in CCVI is that, rather than a focus on a musical work, the content is to a large extent drawn from the experience of the performers in the performance situation. But how can an analytical understanding of the complexity of this situation be created? Mere description is clearly not enough, but a conceptual and analytical framework must be developed.

Johnstone (1985) points to the centrality of power negotiations between the characters in the development of a dramatic scene, in order to create interactions that lie as close to human relations as possible. This line of argument is parallel to Osten, who in her preface to Johnstone's mile-breaking book *Impro* (1985) notes that the primary aspect of improvisational interaction and acting is free association, to respond to one's first impulse. Osten notes that many actors are hindering themselves by delimiting their own possibilities and agency, and sees theatre improvisation techniques as a vital injection to Swedish theatre practice.

Actor and director Linda Ritzén (2016) describes a more complex method for dealing with dramatic texts that challenges traditional ways of using spatial and mimetic preconditions. These neither have a description of a certain room or world that the play takes place in, nor portrayals of 'persons', as in a Shakespeare or Strindberg play. Instead, the text is poetic, fragmented and the roles are represented by, for example, numbers or functions. As an actress, her work aims at being present in a (dramatic) situation during performances. 'All the time, we wanted to remain in a situation where the impulses emerged' (p. 93, my translation). The function of the text, she describes through the notion of a 'reality of the text' (*textens verklighet*,

Ritzén, 2016, p. 92), which is countered by what she calls ‘the fiction of reality’ (*Verklighetens fiktion*, p. 92, author’s capitalization). With this perspective, she can oscillate between a different situation beneath the text, impulses in the performance space and between the actors, and to draw on the ‘reality of the text’ itself. This oscillation, is what I find pertinent for the creation of an analytical understanding also of the performative element in CCVI. Vilc (2015) notes how improvising theatre actors need to consider everything that another actor does as offers to be considered and responded to. Following Ritzén’s model, one can add to this perspective, the materials in the emerging text and music.

Merleau-Ponty (1999) describes the body as the site of personality, and the place where our conscience takes shape through an embodiment in rooms and situations. To Merleau-Ponty, thinking is performance. ‘Thus speech, in the speaker, does not translate ready-made thought, but accomplishes it’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 207). I conceive our vocal and musical interactions as becoming embodied and ‘intoned’ by the intuitive and conscious use and development of musical tropes that show resemblance to linguistic utterances in the sense that they suggest certain meanings and dynamic relations between individuals in the emergent material. Thus, there is a connection between the musical action (or gesture) and its performative and pragmatic, intentional function in the development of the interaction. Much scholarly research focuses mainly on semiotic aspects of musical and vocal gestures, but I argue that the performative pragmatic aspects of the interaction need to be taken into account in an analysis that investigates vocal and musical performance interplay.

I claim that the actions in performances of CCVI take place in many parallel situational layers, as outlined in *Perspectives of the opera improviser* above.. In lyrical improvisations in the ensemble *Impromans*, both the singer and the musician often take the gesture, or the intention, as translated into musical phrases, as points of departure, as means of communication. This can give the improvisations a character that does not have to always take its point of departure in a specific musical style, or a situation. Some of the impulses are intentional, whereas many are conducted in an interactional flow, where an individual intention may be immaterial in the moment of performance. In CCVI, a central focus lies on listening and taking in the actions of the fellow improvisers, as also noted by Sawyer in his description of improvisations as emergent material.

As noted above, Impromans has based this work in musical phrasing exercises based on the Laban/Lillieqvist system. According to Laban,⁶¹ modern dancers create the flow of movements first, and then let music accompany the dynamics in the movements, rather than the other way around, as in traditional dance (or indeed opera repertoire). This shows similarities to opera improvisation and lyrical improvisation, where the communication stands in focus, and the music drama can be seen as a way for the singers to interact in a dramatic situation, supported by the pianist.

Meaning formation, relation and the body

Merleau-Ponty claims that the understanding of another person's gestures is not an intellectual process, but that it is through our body and our actions that we can understand others. This is why, he argues, we in first hand should search for the first attempts to language in the emotional gesticulation. Language is nothing more than a layer for the speech acts where the yet unspoken sentence not only finds a way to become expressed outwards, but also gets existence in themselves and reality can be created as meaning (2003, p. 175). In order to express a gesture or speech, the body must become, or embody, the intention or the thought that is intended. The basic question for an actor or singer (in repertoire or improvisation) is to define the framings of the situation at hand and asking 'what would I have done during these circumstances?'.⁶²

Following Fischer-Lichte (2008) every performative utterance is a social act in the context of a certain situation. An improvising acting singer constantly needs to oscillate between the layered situations at hand (Wilén, 2013 a, b). In this way the group dynamics and the relations between the performers becomes vital to the musico-dramatic interaction. This is vital since the group dynamics of the performers form the contents of the emergent improvisations. It is a constant oscillation between presence of the singing improvisers as musical personae and vocal personae (the characters).⁶²

⁶¹ The dancer and pedagogue Rudolf Laban (1888) had a background in architecture. He worked as choreographer and pedagogue in Europe during the first half of the 20th century. He came to revolutionise dance and movement as professional performance art, developing a system for basal movement elements based on experiences from research of working environments, with a focus on the worker's movements in the work and in their everyday life.

⁶² In some cases the improviser addresses a colleague in the position as person (see Figure 6, Performative spaces/situations *Miss Krappelstein*) or the audience as a presenter, in the position as improviser, or public persona.

Instead of focusing on pleasing an outer, significant other such as a director, coach or conductor, representing a higher position in the opera production hierarchy, as Sandgren (2000) describes, here the improvising actors set common rules which they relate to. Spolin (1999) notes that this improvisational creative work model very much differs from structures of individual development in the modern Western society. She claims that 'approval/ disapproval has become the predominant regulator of effort and position' (p. 7), which highly affects our possibilities to be productive, develop and act creatively. Performance structures where the individual's status depends on value confirmations from authorities hinder participants from engaging fully in collaborative relationships that focus on creative work during performance.

As noted above, Osten brought Johnstone's concept of theatre improvisation to Klarateatern in Sweden in order to investigate whether theatre sport was a possible way of developing the theatre language through competition as format. They soon found that this was not the case, due to the fact that theatre sport is based on evaluation and tension, whereas theatre performance (improvised or based on given texts) is best developed in an atmosphere of safety, searching and deep acceptance.

In my work with CCVI I aim to explore these latter notions of developing the work palette of classically trained performers. This is important to note since many in Sweden still tend to associate theatre and music drama improvisation mainly with theatre sports, although the professional improvisation performance companies today very seldom use competition in their work. Instead, companies like *Stockholms Improvisationsteater* work with intertextual and interperformative techniques, creating performance concepts such as improvised Shakespeare or Norén. Central in the work is a close relation to the audience. This is a framing that is seldom associated with highbrow classical music culture, or 'fine arts'. Even though groundbreaking and truly famed highbrow art performance artists such as Abramovic (Fischer-Lichte, 2008) base their artistic practice on performance in close dialogue with the audience, they are mainly transgressing and problematizing boundaries to personal and individual experiences and ethical power dimensions of human interaction, approaching the audience as individuals in collectives.

The vocal performer and the audience

In improvised music drama, or opera/lyrical improvisation, we approach the audience in a way that very much resembles the approach of Dario Fo, or the Swedish clown ensemble *1-2-3 Schtunk*. To Fo, the actor rather than the dramatist

was the central figure in theatre. He created his own plays, popular theatre for the ordinary people, as a combination between farce and satire with political dimensions, often in collaboration with actor and director Franca Rame, who grew up in a commedia family. Fo lays focus on the satirical intentions of the material and avoided modernist experimental work, which was of little interest to him. His drama is focused on the dramatic situation, although the most central part (and role) for him as actor was to tell the story. In this sense, he saw the actor as storyteller, as he described in Rome 1986:

The great actors I have known do not perform but recount. In writing, the actor must find the story not the character. Characters exist in function of the story. (Farrell & Scuderi, 2000, p. 11)

Fo and Rame stand firmly based in performance traditions of *commedia dell'arte*, where the acting techniques and skills are crucial to the quality of the performance. In the same way, we are classically trained singers and musicians and are firmly based in using our instruments as we are professionally trained.

This acting approach very much differs from the approach of Stanislavskij, who sees the actor only as character inside the fictive situation. As a CCVI performer, I find that my practice combines both of these aspects on stage, as we oscillate between inner perspectives and dramaturgical aspects of constructing the emergent *mythos*, as well as acting inside of fictive characters during performance. In the IAM analysis below I aim to describe how the oscillations between these situations can take place, and how the audience react. Although our performances so far are considerably less political than Fo's, there might be similarities in the way we use improvisation as a means to create communication with the audience on levels they had not expected. Fo's artistic work on stage was

founded on the momentum of endlessly changing situations, or on a whirligig of comings and goings, in which well-grounded, plausible situations are twisted and stretched to the verge of the surreal, only to be brought back to some semblance not of order but of the chaos that is political reality. The absurdity of the situations is never whimsical fantasy as an end in itself but an invitation to the audience to impose order, their order, a new order, on a political status quo that has been revealed as nonsensical. (Farrell & Scuderi, 2000, p. 11)

Projects and analyses

Performative situations in CCVI

How can the performative layers of the performance situations be described, and how do they relate to each other? Rettie (2004) discusses relations between reality and presence, using Goffman's (1974) framing concept. Presence is defined as an experience that arrives as a result of an involvement in a framed experience as a whole, and the more carried away a person gets by the experience, the less apparent is the frame. To me this is closely related to what Cone (1974) describes as the singer's embodied presence of the vocal persona, relating to a dramatic situation of a performance. In her investigation of presence, Rettie uses Giddens's distinction between places as 'physical settings for social interaction' (p. 118) containing social norms, whereas spaces are framed 'where presence is experienced', the frame both constructing and making sense of the experience. 'Places are spaces, but not all spaces are places' (ibid.).

The notions of the difference in presence of the pianist and the singer in a recital situation as mentioned above is highly recognised in my experience. It goes well with my suggestion that singers and instrumentalists communicate on many levels in performance. I have earlier referred to persona as used by Cone (2008) in a discussion of how to conceive of how improvisers oscillate between the layers of perspectives, or situations, such as the dramatic situation, the musical situation and the rhetorical situation (relating to the audience) during performance (Wilén, 2013a). In relation to interactions between singer(s) and pianist in lyrical improvisation performance, this can be connected to the 19th century Lied performance style, which I call the vocal concert approach. Since the singer in this approach does not act as a dramatic character in an imagined situation, the place could be defined as the situation where the singer acts as the vocal persona,⁶³ embodying emotions and meanings through facial expression and voice. The musical space is the sounding interface for the musical interaction (Figure 4) where the instrumentalist is present through sound and the singer through the voice. In

⁶³ In Vernissage as agent and the voice is the instrumental persona, as will be discussed below.

some of the labs and performances in this project, such as *Facets*, *Vernissage* and *Audio Activists* (described further below) experiences of the singer's agency in the performative norms of the vocal concert approach are investigated from a singer's perspective.

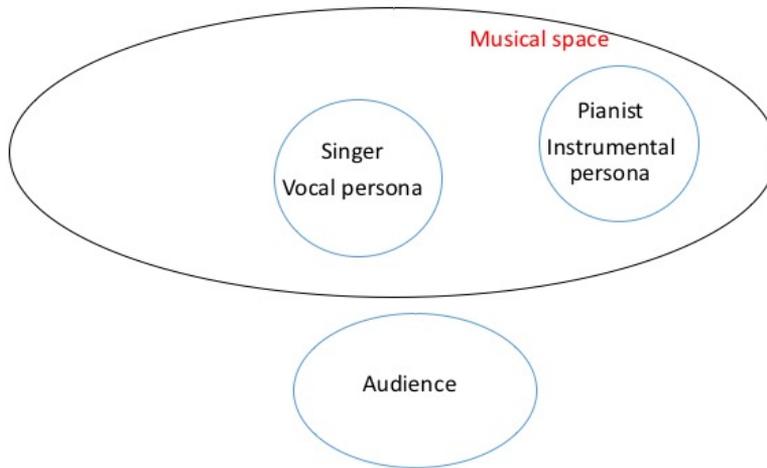


Figure 4:
Musical situation/space in a vocal improvisation recital

In a vocal operatic approach which, as I suggest, corresponds to the performative approach used in opera improvisation and opera repertoire performance, the singers as vocal personae are present in a dramatic situation, a space which is framed by the common agreements and understandings of the interpretation of the performance that is applied (Figure 5). In a realistic dramatic framing, the actors in the roles of characters are engaged 'as if' they are in the current dramatic situation (as noted above). The musical interactions between singers and pianist in an opera performance take place in the musical space, which is a parallel layer. In opera improvisation, the singers work with techniques for staged interaction. For instance the two differing ways to relating to each other in the Table 1 (with orchestra) and Table 2 (the collage) above.

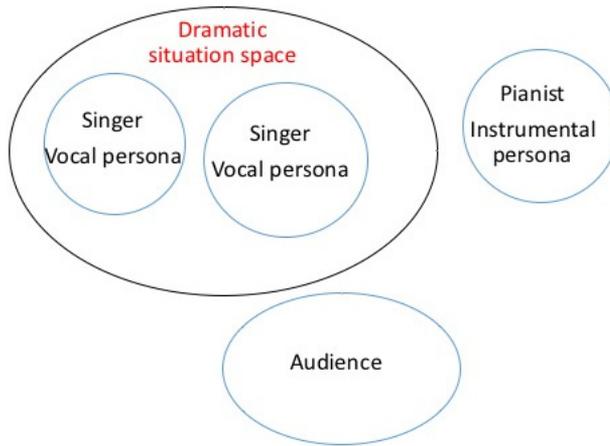


Figure 5:
Dramatic situation/space in opera and opera improvisation

Below follow analyses of *Miss Krappelstein* (Video example 2, Table 1), *Glas* (Video example 3, Table 2), *Walpurgis fire* (Video example 4, Table 3) and *Vernissage* (Video example 5, Table 4) of CCVI above.

In the first example, *Miss Krappelstein* (Figure 6), the singers interact as dramatic personae, embodying the characters of the herd boy, the queen and the maid in a fictional dramatic situation (red circle below). When Sara-as-queen turns to the audience, asking them whether the herd boy is her son or not, she includes them in a rhetorical, communicative situation. When the percussionist, Lars, and Sara-as-queen communicate, she acts both in the dramatic situation as the queen, and also as Sara, the improviser. Sara acts in two parallel situations, with two keyings. In the first (red circle below) she acts as vocal persona – ‘as if’ she is a queen, whereas in the second (orange circle below), she acts as herself, making a musical agreement with a colleague. The musical space is the situational layer including the singers and the pianist (black circle below) and the rhetorical interactional space includes the spectators and the dialogues that takes place there (green circle below).⁶⁴

⁶⁴ In order to make a clear visual model, the personae of some layered spaces (such as musical personae) are omitted here.

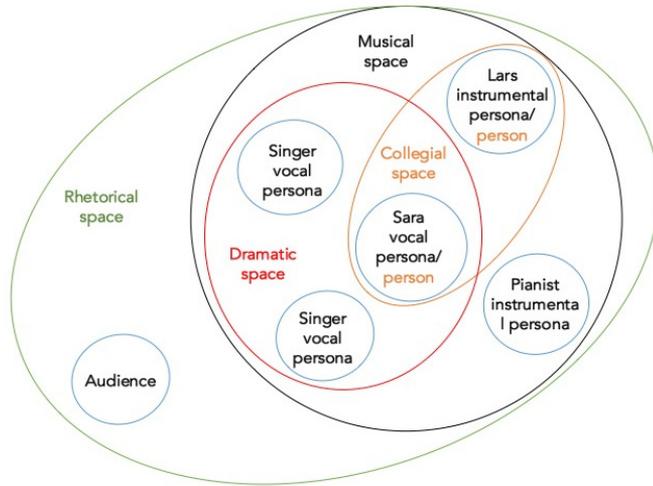


Figure 6:
Performative spaces/situations in *Miss Krappelstein*

In the collage *Glass* (Video example 3, Table 2), the singers and the pianist have keyed the framed performance situation as a non-dramatic scene, and the singers enter and act mostly as opera improvisers, as musical personae, with short exceptions for the snapshot scenes, where they enact vocal personae as characters in dramatic situations (although the audience never gets information about who they are, their background and so on) while the singers maintaining the loops mostly interact with the soloist in the musical space together with the pianist.

The third example, *Walpurgis fire* (Video example 4, Table 3) is a vocal recital improvisation, where singer and pianist meet and interact as vocal and instrumental personae in the musical space, apart from musical personae.

Meanwhile, in the fourth example *Vernissage* (Video example 5, Table 4) the singers do not perform words or embody characters in a dialogic dramatic situation, or in an improvised song. Rather, they perform their voices as sounding instruments in a duo (Figure 6). They perform as agents and sound as instrumental personae in a joint musical space, apart from musical personae.

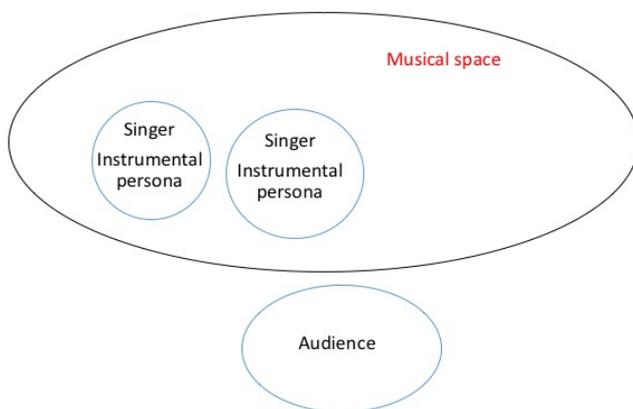


Figure 7:
Musical situation/space of a duo vocal performance in *Vernissage*

With the help of Cone's (1974) concept of persona, we have discussed how the overlaid situations may be described in relation to musical performance. The next step is to relate this line of thought to Merleau Ponty's argument (1999): in order to act, a body must embody the intended thought. Following this, it seems fully possible that a singer can perform actions without words, or embody a character. So, if a singer can perform actions without words, then it would seem fully possible also for an instrumentalist to do this – in the musical space. Rather than focusing the matter of using the voice or not, as Cone (1974) does, an embodied intention in CCVI can result in either a vocal or a musical action, created by the improviser in order to take part in the ongoing dialogue(s). Consequently, it appears clear that a singer embodying a vocal persona on stage in terms of a character in a given text, such as an opera aria, in theory can do so without acting, also when there are no embodied intentions connected to the vocal phrases. This is a useful way to approach a problem that is known to take place in the staged interaction of repertoire performance: a fellow singer is physically in place, performing all too marvellously in the musical situation with the orchestra, but not relating to the other singers as dramatic characters (vocal persons) within the situational frame, the dramatic space on stage. In a repertoire performance, the composed music goes on no matter how the singers interact with each other (or not). In CCVI, the performers need to maintain dialogue in order to keep focus on the concentration of the emerging mythos and the praxis situations. If the improvisers are not taking part in maintaining the frames of the agreed context(s), it often becomes evident in the improvisation, whereas in repertoire it unfortunately does not.

This leaves us with a framework which in theory offers support for the suggestion that the performers in opera improvisation perform vocal and musical actions, creating music as an emergent material. In the IAM analysis below, I will describe my analysis of such actions in practice.

Improvisation opera projects

Below, three examples of projects and performances conducted in this project in the context of *Operaimprovisatörern*, (*Oi*)a are presented. More detailed information about the work and contents of these and other examples is found on the homepage.

*Opera Nova, power, love, remix*⁶⁵ (*ON*)

The ensemble investigated ways of deconstructing images of gender and power in opera and opera improvisation performance, by changing roles and using different readings, such as realism, parody and movement.

I initiated the project inspired by a theoretical vantage point of post-structural feminism. The work concept, semiotic aspects of operatic bodies and voices on stage, and the role of the author, were researched and discussed through staged methods of deconstruction (Wilén, 2013). The project was performed in three Swedish cities: Stockholm, Malmö and Vadstena. In each city, *Oi* arranged a stage conversation, inviting significant actors in opera, theatre, music and media. In our first stage conversation, two of the guests (Gunilla Brodreg and Göran Gademan) started a dialogue which ignited a fervent debate on opera and gender in Sweden during the spring of 2012.

Musico-dramatic concept

Repertoire opera scenes by composers such as Bizet, Donizetti, Mozart and Puccini were chosen. The vocal parts were to be studied by all singers, so that we could make different interpretations in terms of vocal timbre and phrasing. This was also a method for tracking the 'natural' habits we as singers have developed both in singing and in listening. In the work, the singers - many for the first time - changed roles with each other, trying out both new gender roles and voice *Fach*. Despite that all have worked with opera and classical repertoire for many years, this was the very first time to change into other vocal parts.

⁶⁵ This project is also discussed in Wilén 2013b, Wilén 2015 and Wilén submitted for publication a.

Performative aspects

The changes of subject positions and perspectives became a very efficient way of deconstructing our own images and experiences, especially in the intertwining of change of positions with each other. We used improvisation techniques in combination with the repertoire scenes to find creative approaches to new readings, that could change in each performance. All singers learned all the parts by heart in order to be able to sing and perform all the parts and make their own musical and dramatic choices in the scenes. In the performances, opera improvisation scenes were intertwined with the repertoire scenes. In my work log one question recurs: what is relevant to the actors and what is relevant to the outer eye? This has made me aware that CCVI is a space where I can make my thoughts and intentions meet the audience directly, without being evaluated by an outer eye. This was a vital process for me as a singer being used to adapt to structures in the field in order to fit in. ON also gave a new, critical perspective on our work. In my notes from 2013, I read:

I imagined that opera improvisation represented gender awareness and new thinking, in contrast to repertoire... A significant vocal and scenic idiom can give me agency as improviser, which contrasts to my role as repertoire singer. My subject position as a singer becomes clearer in a significant idiom. It gives the others and me more space to jam. Perhaps irony, or distance, is used to mark that one doesn't really stand for the actions as a person. I also perceive how used we are to take certain roles, or opera singer idioms, and that it can be connected to our voices as instruments... It is hard to change a behaviour, perhaps vain to think that it's possible. Perhaps it is the way of acting that the body has learnt to contain.

Video example 6 shows a bricolage of scenes taken from the three productions of ON conducted in 2012.⁶⁶



Video example 6: Bricolage Opera Nova – power, love, remix
<https://youtu.be/QN84f9yivWI>

⁶⁶ In this bricolage some techniques are omitted, since these are represented elsewhere in this dissertation material.

*Last Minute – an Opera Adventure! (LM)*⁶⁷

LM is a project that aims to explore collaborations with other actors in the field of Western classical music. The symphony orchestra is one of the strongest classical institutions, with rather fixed performance formats deriving from the discourses of interpreting musical works of the Western classical music canon. In LM we created a format that would work in the production context of the classical institution, while at the same time deconstructing the vocal parts of the repertoire. In this way, experiences from the work in ON regarding investigating new approaches and relations to the notated musical material was recontextualised into a more extensive musical production format, with orchestra and conductor. The context of the institution offered a forum where we as singers could investigate the clashing of the discourses of the classical singer and the improviser within our own practices. Standing in front of an orchestra is the very image of the professional goal for many classical singers, and to do so without prepared material would be a challenge of the identity of me as classical singer of repertoire. The project has been performed in three productions with Svenska Kammarorkestern and Gävle Symfoniorkester 2014-17. Video example 7 is presented below.

Musico-dramatic concept

13 orchestral pieces, in terms of excerpts from operas, symphonies and ballets by composers such as Bizet, Mozart, Tchaikovsky and Verdi were chosen and arranged by Alexandra Orrgård Solén and Eric Solén. In their arrangements, the solo vocal parts were extracted along with significant ostinatos and instrumental solos. Apart from these pieces, the orchestra played an overture (in 2014 the overture from *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, Rossini and in 2016 the first movement from Beethovens Symphony No. 1. As a finale, we performed the finale from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, with a new Swedish text written by me. The aim was to create an orchestral foundation on which the singers (and if possible, also the orchestra) could improvise freely. The pieces were labelled with individual letters from A to O and filed so that the musicians could easily find them on their music stands during performance. The main reason for this was that Gregor decided which pieces would be played during a specific performance. The pianist acted as a musical dramaturge, improvising with the singers between the orchestral parts while at the same time choosing the next relevant piece from a list (see below). When he was ready, he showed the letter of the piece to the conductor, who in turn showed the orchestra which piece to take up. Meanwhile, the pianist kept on playing with the singers, leading the music over

⁶⁷ This project is also discussed in Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a.

harmonically to the orchestral piece. The singers had no idea about what piece was chosen, since this happened behind our backs during the performance. The orchestra was welcome to join in on the opera improvisation parts out of choice. We also decided to add one free orchestral improvisation piece, where the conductor could lead the orchestra in a live extemporization. During the first production, this was not so commonly used, whereas it was common in the second and third production. The reason for this might be that this kind of experimental improvisation was a new thing for the orchestra. Although there was no set order of the orchestral pieces during the opera, we created a dramaturgical frame in order to address issues of presenting the genre(s) and the work methods to the audience.

I developed the dramatic concept together with Alexandra. The young audience received a letter from us beforehand, in which each group of students was asked to bring one item. When the audience arrived they put their items into a big box in the foyer. Just before the performance the items were collected by the pianist. In the beginning of the performance, the singers opened the box and presented the items, which then became part of the opera story to be created. After the overture we gave a brief introduction, presenting the idea of improvisation, playing sheet music and asking suggestions from the audience. An opera of about 27-30 minute was improvised, featuring the suggestions from the audience and occasionally addressing them directly during performance. We created a dramaturgical frame in order to address issues of presenting the genre(s) and the work methods.

Performative aspects

In the work with the LM repertoire it occurred to me several times that improvising on the repertoire pieces drove me into investigating new improvisational aspects of my voice and my musical abilities. The operatic narrative and the dramatic situation are very dominant in Oi's work, and it is in these areas we develop new improvisation abilities. Since the music in SM derived from classical vocal repertoire, the 'new' improvisational relation to musical patterns challenged me to meet my initial classical vocal identity. As my notes indicate, I initially experienced my position as much more exposed, even to myself in the practice room, just like in the work with the Scarpia part years earlier. I perceived that I started to judge my vocal delivery harshly when I practiced, and reconnected to my early experiences as repertoire singer preparing for lessons or concerts. It was as though an inner guide (Johansson, 2008) was present, evaluating my musical choices, even before I had made them.

I slip out of the listening and into the 'achieving-a-good-singer-sound'. Achieving a good melody. I lose the concentration totally in the cadenza towards the end. In one place I succeed in keeping a melody as compared to before. I start to sweat when I think about that this is the feeling in which I am educated, and that I now in every possible way try to escape from it. (Sara, from notes, September 2014).

This might of course be due to the fact that musical aspects of performance are of such vital importance in classical concert institutions. At the outset of LM, I had perceived the challenging potential of the project as structural, in terms of experimental interaction between a free ensemble and an orchestral institution. But as I challenged myself as a classical singer, improvising on the concert hall stage, I also challenged myself into taking the position as an improvising vocal musician, obliged to improvise melodies and accompaniments within a set harmonic and dynamic structure with highly significant others.

Video example 7 from October 2016 shows how a free improvisation scene with orchestra, followed by improvisations on *Dido's Lament* by Henry Purcell.



Video example 7: Carry my Throne!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLQoldQb1zQ&feature=youtu.be>

Gravity of Life (GoL)

The idea with *Gravity of Life (GoL)* was to find new ways for OI to interact with other agents in the classical field. The idea to work with choirs came from Mette (in OI), and together she and I developed the concept GoL. For the first time OI

worked with integrating improvisation and newly composed music. Ulrika Emanuelsson composed three contrasting movements: a beginning, a middle section and an ending. For the first time, OI also chose to work with a theme for the performances. GoL aims to address humans' ways of coping with complicated relations under pressure of unexpected events, for instance to leave someone or something, or being left by someone. Af Klint wrote a libretto for the composed movements based on text fragments from the ensemble members. I was responsible for the artistic method development in the project. GoL was performed in five workshops and performances in Lund and Stockholm in 2016-17.

The workshops were held over two days (including performance), which instigated a high working tempo, where all the improvisation techniques and the composed parts were rehearsed. Many of the participating choirs were prize winners in international choir competitions and among the top range of choirs in Sweden. We developed a dramaturgical outline of the scenes of the performance, where the order of the techniques was written down on the sides of the stage. Four different opera improvisation techniques for the choir scenes were used, where the conductor was free to arrange parts of the choir improvisations live, in terms of instrumentation and dynamics.

From choral voice to acting body

Our main objective was to provide the singers with useful experiences of working with opera improvisation in a safe and creative workshop atmosphere during two days of jamming, presenting tools for further artistic, vocal and scenic development. Another vital objective was to create a public opera performance, displaying both improvisations and written music in a qualitative stage format. It was therefore of utmost importance to find clear and effective techniques that were easy to apprehend, but still had place for artistic development and quality due to the individual user (the choir singers of different levels and ages). The techniques should have both musical and dramatic implications and some were to be applied in the improvisation scenes, some in the written scenes.

In my earlier experiences as teacher and creative coach, I have almost exclusively aimed for giving tools for soloists on fairly advanced levels, who are ready to take on solo roles individually, as well as interacting in ensembles. In this project, we had an entirely different set of prerequisites. The choir singers were advanced concert performers. On some occasions they had tried out improvisation and movement in performance, but it was not the main objectives of their choral practices. In GoL, the aims were therefore to find ways for the choir singers to move individually on the stage, and to investigate the possibilities for individual action and expression

through improvisational methods and strategies. Since the singers were parts of a vocal collective, it was crucial to find methods where individual choices could be tried out and enacted, but inside the safe frame of collective actions, as opposed to solo performance. Central in the work was therefore to create useful musico-dramatic improvisation techniques with larger groups, with space for individual initiatives on vocal and movement levels. Therefore, the musico-structural focus was set aside in favour for the individual creative agency of the improvising singers, which is heard in the emergent material as music.

Performative aspects

In my experience, groups have unexpected abilities to give their members space for invested, creative contributions. The main issue is creating an open and safe atmosphere inspired by open agreements and dialogue. Needless to say, these perhaps highflying goals and values turned out to be quite challenging to concretise on the floor in such limited time slots as in the two-day workshops. This is also connected to the fact that the Oi ensemble has a shared leadership, and decides on matters of lines of action, rehearsal design, pedagogical and artistic matters together. Although the time conditions in the project were extreme, it is apparent that the participating choir singers of all ages had great capacities to improvise. In one day they learned to apply several techniques, acting in new musico-dramatic contexts on every try, also creating creative and coherent drama, text and music as ensemble, in relation to the conductor and sometimes as soloists (especially in GoL I and III). The singers were at all times welcome to sit back if they wished to, but very few of the participating choir singers chose to do so.

After the rehearsals on Saturday December 3rd, it became clear that not all in Oi had been able to perceive the intentions and offers of the others in the story we had created. The acoustics of the church room in Hjorthagen at times made it difficult to perceive every sung word, especially if an actor was singing turned away from the others. The situation was rather surprising to me as improviser, since this very seldom happens in our work. The rapid development of the choir had inspired us to set our own limits higher than ever on that day. We had aimed for an operatic narrative with four main characters with equal space in the story, in combination with the required time and space for the choir singers to act.

This had offered some demanding challenges on a dramaturgical level, which also led to tensions in Oi. Reflecting on these situations now, I see that the friction effected the actors to react to the problem individually rather than as a group. I see a similarity to complex and stressful situations in repertoire productions, where I have experienced how singers seldom have the time and place to raise discussions

on difficulties in the process, due to production hierarchies. Instead some singers chose to articulate the friction as critique versus leaders or colleagues between themselves, while keeping the 'business as usual' in the work. In *Oi*, there is no leader to hold responsible but ourselves. The close interaction makes us as improvisers vulnerable to stressful and unsolved situations like these, especially as leaders of the work in *GoL*. We solved the problem by subjecting the importance of the characters to one story. In order to keep the dramaturgy extra clear we also decided to use the narrator function if needed.

Video example 8 shows a bricolage of scenes and the choir techniques used in the first two performances of *GoL*. Video example 9 shows the final scene of *Gravity of Life IV* in Hjørtøghagen in December 2016.



Video example 8: Bricolage *Gravity of Life*
<https://youtu.be/zWZ-cgQKOUw>

Video example 9: Final scene, *Gravity of Life IV*.
<https://youtu.be/XKziDR6cSyg>

Concert improvisation experimentations

Below are some examples from the work in a duo setting. Several examples from other Impromans concert performances are placed in the parts addressing the Interplay analysis and Performative tropes below.

Facets

In this lab, *Impromans* cooperated with light designer Kristofer Langerbeck. We aimed to create a new visual and experiential performance format, for a vocal recital duo. The idea of the concept was to combine elements of classical art songs with improvisation in a visual format that allowed the light designer to shape the images of the musicians' physical bodies as visual representations. The purpose was to investigate whether not being directly seen in the performance room (or place) would alter the experiences of the singer and pianist as performing subjects in a traditional Lied duo. This vocal performance approach can be very delimiting for us as classically performers, since the norms and discourses of the art song performance tradition and how the performers should act are so strong. These norms put us in certain subject positions as vocal and instrumental personae with little artistic agency to change positions. The sessions took place at the Inter Arts Center in Malmö in June and November 2014.

A white tarpaulin was used to build a room for the performers, so that there was a thin wall between us and the audience. Behind the performers, a row of RGB lights⁶⁸ were set up, which were controlled by computer software, making it possible for the light designer (situated behind the audience on the other side of the room) to direct colours, shadows, and facets of the performers on the tarpaulin screen, during the performance. At no point did the musicians have eye contact with the audience.

We wished to create a concept that would make it possible to investigate new images of the duo recital situation from outside, as well as give new experiences to the performers from the inside. I was interested to see whether the white wall would give me the possibility to change my subject position in the performance situation as classical singer, changing between different vocal personae, or roles, during the improvisations. The improvisations were inspired by music by Wilhelm Stenhammar, Robert Schumann, Laban movements and notions of emotional expressions.

Performative aspects

In the work, many unexpected technical complications occurred with the light design software, which affected the processes in the musical and visual improvisation. On the second lab, the whole light set up broke, and the performance was delayed for 40 minutes. Despite a quick recovering process, the original set up

⁶⁸ RGB color system allows a mix of all colours.

was not recreated, and therefore only blue light was available instead of the whole light palette as was planned and experimented with during the process. This naturally affected both the experiences of the group and of the visitors.

This is the only project that I have conducted as classical vocal improviser where I have not had eye contact with the audience. It was an alienating experience that made clear to me how dependent we as improvisers are of the communication with others in the room where we play. It was as if I could not find any situation or relation in which there was space to act, or interact. This made it difficult for me to find ideas for music.

I am a bit uncertain of what's enough, because I'm so used to act on the audience. Now when I don't have this contact I am completely exposed (Sara, from recorded session November 2014).

This is one of the few times that I have experienced this as an improviser. These experiences show that we in improvisation are highly dependent on relating (socially) to the audience in a room, a performance situation, in order to get access to our inner images, which is the starting point of our improvisations. When I reflect on this now, I also perceive that the overwhelming presence of technical equipment in relation to the tarpaulin made the physical place so full of impressions that it was hard for me to concentrate on creating the inner frames for the improvisations.

I start to evaluate my images. I work alone with the images here, I'm not in contact with the audience. Am I going back into evaluating myself as when performing a work? I feel unfree (Sara, from notes, December 2014).

The following remarks between Conny and Sara indicate that the experience was different from concert performance of repertoire and improvisation in terms of role-taking in the performance situation. The basic difference was that the visual contact with the audience and each other was broken, which affected both performers directly, almost stopping the flow of associations and emerging patterns at times. Conny notes that it was difficult for him to know what to relate to.

Not to stand in contact with the audience and to be situated behind there, felt a bit confined in a strange way, you didn't know what to... There was nothing to relate to whatsoever (Conny, recorded session, November 2014).

Conny experienced how he was helped by the musical material in that situation. He notes that the room where the performance takes place also is an important factor in the improvisational situation. Sara agrees and notes that the difference between

standing by the grand piano and performing art song in concert (as she in fact had done the very night before in the same room) was immense.

It was so... naked, in a way, in another way than when we stand in this 'song bubble', because just to stand by a grand piano, on any kind of stage, brings sort of a, concert dimension. And when you have that going on, you are so protected by it..., but here it wasn't like that.... It was hard to distance yourself, to go into a role and be sort of a... singer.

Well, but this is included in the performance format... the ambitions when you make a performance is to become as 'naked', or exposed, as possible.

Yes, one really exposes oneself, as human being, not as... singer...

(From conversation between Conny and Sara, recorded session, May 2014).

This experience indicated to me that a vocal concert approach in lyrical improvisation is often dependent on the visual interaction in the social 'place' of the room, as well as in the musical space between the performers in order for the lyrical and musical interaction to emerge. These parallel situations need to be present as potential layers. Video example 10 is a brief excerpt of the second lab performance at the artistic research symposium *Tacit or Loud* at the Inter Arts Center in November 2014.



Video example 10: Excerpt from *Facets of Sorrow*
<https://youtu.be/rhnmAdu5JM>

Vernissage

As teachers in a course in classical improvisation, a colleague and I were contacted by the artist Magdolna Szabò, who was interested in cooperating with us in a project where we could improvise music to her paintings during a vernissage at Staffanstorps Konsthall in February 2015. Soprano Tiina Markkanen, violinist Fritiof Palm and pianist and composer Jonatan Sersam and I decided to pursue this project, and we met for some rehearsals during January and February 2015.

Magdolna Szabò's work has an abstract, geometrical character, and we early agreed with the artist on improvising without using words or creating stories or drama. This brought some new and interesting challenges into the work. How could we create interactional strategies that were open, but not text-based? This also clearly addressed the issue that I discussed earlier; the interface between concert performance discourse and musico-dramatic performance. We developed a set of strategies, based on a more musico-structural perspective. Together with Szabó we decided to improvise to five of her paintings in the hall. We set a structure for the instrumental setting, to achieve variation in the performance.

Performative aspects

In the *Vernissage* improvisation (Video example 5, Table 4), where the singers did not use words, interaction was possible only through the subject position as instrumental persona. We could not identify certain situations as vocal personae, nor interact as characters in a situation by using our bodies to embody significations given by a text or drama that we created in performance. At first I found this task very difficult, since this is not my usual point of departure. It turned out that using musical role-taking, or functions, instead of thinking in terms of musical material worked well. The primary focus in the performative situation was the painting to which we improvised in the moment, and we directed our visual attention away from ourselves further on to the painting in order to point our own and the visitors' attention. When I watch the video below from the same performance, I notice how I sometimes when singing in a low register come very close to starting to build a relation, a situation or an approach. It is visible in my face and in my eyes. But as I change into another function, or a very high register, the approach changes. This indicates a professionalised vocal performative pattern: as a singer, I am used to performing certain phrases with a certain situated intention, related to my inner images and the emergent narrative. It goes well in line with Potter's notion (1998) that classical singers in concert performance channel emotional expression to the face. I became aware of a concrete way in which I could use my voice improvise as

instrumental persona, not ‘having to’ impersonate a vocal persona. Still, it was possible to create phrases based on intentions and ways of acting musically in the interplay with the others. In this way, the new subject position as instrumental persona deconstructed my habit of enacting as vocal persona in vocal concert performance.

Video example 11 is an excerpt from two improvised pieces from the Vernissage at Staffanstorps Konsthall in February 2015. Video example 12 is a longer experimental version of four improvised pieces, edited in collaboration with the artist Magdolna Szabó, where the paintings are featured as focus of attention rather than the performers. The aim is to invite the viewer into experiencing the music as emanating directly from the visual experience of the art works.



Video example 11: Excerpt from *Vernissage*
<https://vimeo.com/217539323>

Video example 12: Experimental version, *Vernissage*
<https://vimeo.com/232164395/6482a9bc59>

Audio Activists (AA)

In June 2015, I met with Jonatan Sersam and Fabio Monni, both composers and improvisers, for a five day lab at the Inter Arts Center in Malmö. The aim was to explore electronics as a means for live improvisation. The project ended with a public performance.

For me this was a unique opportunity to work with two composers who are also improvisers, and take part of their experiences on how to structure improvisation in layers of sound and movement in a joint musical work. Early in the process we

discovered that we needed some literary material as a vantage point, and we chose poems by Tomas Tranströmer. When we started, the idea was to make the sound effects as 'local' as possible, with simple devices for us to handle while interacting, and with speakers placed close to our physical positions in the room in order to get a more acoustic experience. This arrangement was intended to facilitate the instrumental practice of the musician and the singer in their improvisational processes. The effects would appear not so much as an effect, but rather as sound variations out of our artistic choices in the moment.

What does this do to me: you have to play your sound, or make a sound and then manage the device afterwards. You have to step out of your sound to edit it. How will this work for me? (From notes, June 2015).

As it turned out, the technical set up in AA became considerably more complex than we had planned. In the end, Monni did all the sound processing of my voice on the interface. At first, I was somewhat concerned that the vocal sound was projected out into the room from so many directions. But after a while I experienced that this was instead a crucial factor. It was a new, and very useful experience for me to perceive that my own instrument was projected and transformed in other directions than the ones I took myself as singer in the moment.

When we started to work with the effects: attack, sustain, delay and release, I noticed that it was easier for me to take on the function of making a sound scape while Sersam improvised melodies, or solos. This is usually not so easy to do, since the role-taking between voice and piano in the classical music repertoire is so fixed. Monni had the idea to project the sounds in the loudspeakers spread around in the room, which created an entirely different effect. At first I found this a little disappointing, but very soon the disappointment gave way to a perception of advantages and new insights. In the sounding space, these dimensions merged together with Sersam's piano and projected effects. The merging sounds created a blurring or transcending of vocal and instrumental personae that occurred in the flow of the action. The echoes and processed variations that sounded through the room created additional time between our impulses, where I as singer had space for agency to change positions. In fact, as my instrument was partly being played by someone else, Monni, the sounding space in the room became an extension of our common identities.

In the final setup, there was one microphone for the grand piano, installed inside, and one for the singer. The microphones were connected to an audio interface and on to a laptop, and two midi keyboards controlled the sound effects, one for each improviser. The computers used the software *Ableton live*. The sound went from the

computer into the mixer (both filtered and unprocessed signal) and further out to speakers in each corner of the room. We worked a lot with different placements in the room in relation to the equipment. As Monni had a central role as musician and not only sound engineer, I suggested a set up where we would be placed side by side.

I started to use my body in the physical space to improvise. I sit next to Fabio so that I can enter and exit, which is extremely well working for me. The movement on and off stage is also a way to clarify how we can take space as soloists, as Fabio said, that we use in the sounding space. Aha, it's like in opera improvisation, when and who. (From notes, June 2015)

Together we designed a stage light with one colour each, to create three rooms in the stage space. After some attempts, we decided that I would have a cheek microphone. This was very useful for me, since I had found the hand microphone, or even the microphone on a stand, quite evasive, as it simply took up physical space where I am used to being able to move.

Performative aspects

The sessions and the performance with *Audio Activists* made me aware of how the sound of my voice is a fundamental part of my musical identity as a classical singer. To create and project sounds of 'good' quality is part of the core of being a classical singer, the singer's habitus (Gvion, 2015, Sandgren, 2008, Potter, 1998). Using effects while singing is indeed as adding on another instrument to the voice. To me it was most of all difficult to remain within a musical or dramatic thought when I had to turn my eyes downward to the computer screen. As in *Facets*, I realised that I, as a singer, am very dependent on being able to project my vision onto specific parts of the space where we play. I realise now that this may have been one of the causes for being so stressed in the *Facet* lab situation. My vision was hindered by the tarpaulin, and it was not only because of the lack of contact with the visitors, but for the lack of actual space in the room, the absence of scope for thoughts to grow. This indicated to me that the vision is a crucial part of my instrument as improviser.

By the use of electronics, the projection of my voice was distributed between two actors: me and Fabio Monni. In this way, I embodied a vocal persona, while my voice was divided into a vocal persona (my live persona) and an instrumental persona, directed by Fabio Monni as agent. Jonatan Sersam improvised live on the piano, while projecting parts of his piano sounds through electronics in the same way, thereby acting as an agent creating two instrumental personae. As the sounds of the electronics merged, our instrumental identities detached from our physical bodies. This can be seen as a deconstructive process, detaching the signified (the

musician) from the signifier (the instrumental sound) (Derrida, 1997; Dyndahl, 2008). In turn, this made it possible for me as singer to be able to shift subject positions, layers, or modes, in the course of the improvisation, into improvising a solo scene where I oscillated between the subject position of a vocal persona and an instrumental persona. This corresponded to my initial goal with the sessions.

Video example 13 presents an improvisation based on the poem *Affected meditation* (*Upprörd Meditation*, my translation) by Tomas Tranströmer from the performance at the Inter Arts Center in June 2015.



Video example 13: Excerpt *Affected Meditation*
<https://youtu.be/8EvaWUS2tPY>

Improvisation exhibition

The exhibition communicated views on music history from a singer's and artist-researcher's perspective, since these are not usually represented in music history literary formats.

Together with Margot Edström (Junior Lecturer at Malmö Art Academy), I developed an exhibition with material consisting of posters, video and image projections. The text and image material is collected from the literature and findings of my work with the article on the history of vocal improvisation (see Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication b) in combination with samples of video and text from my research material, including videos from performances and interview excerpts. The reason for adding my own research material was to provide the historical parts with aural and moving material, to convey a vivid impression of improvisation as practice, not only in silent, still media as image and text. The goal

was to create a material that presented classical improvisation as a practice in a variety of settings and contexts, such as concert venues and research symposiums. The exhibition was combined with the salon as performance format, where *Impromans* conducted improvisations in close dialogue with the audience in a form of performance paper, combining improvisations with presentation and readings from literature on vocal improvisation in the 19th century. In two of the salons, musicologist Tobias Lund performed as a guest lecturer, presenting perspectives on the inner landscapes of *Die Nacht* (also partly performed by *Impromans*) a ballad by Schubert, in which the tonal language invites the listener to associate to an improvisatory act of creation, filled with mimetic musical images. The improvisations were influenced by communicative techniques of the 19th century *improvvisatori* such as Sgricci and Orozco.

The exhibition was premiered at *Orenaes Saloner* in Denmark in November 2015. It has also been presented at the Swedish Research Council symposium at the Inter Arts Center, Suellska Villan in Malmö, Helsingborgs Konserthus and in the library of Malmö Academy of Music.



Improvisation in higher classical music education

I see improvisation as a forum where singers and instrumentalists may problematise contemporary Western classical vocal performance practice through ludic action (Sjöström, n.d.). In my role as teacher and coach, my goal is to create prerequisites for classical singers and musicians to investigate improvisation as a tool for knowledge building through action, without prepared material.

Since 2005, I have worked with the singers at the performance programme at MAM, where I also teach a course of improvisation for classical musicians since 2014. Since four years I am also regularly engaged as guest teacher at the higher music education department at Metropolia of Applied Sciences in Helsinki.

The work aims to give the students tools for creating their own materials in dialogue with each other, based on interactions on different levels. This is especially important when instrumentalists with a limited experience of stage work are joining. We do exercises in communication, creativity, movement and physical listening, where all work is conducted within the field of musical and dramatic improvisation.

- Trying new roles and functions in music and musical drama
- Group interaction, creativity and listening
- Movement (gesture, relation to space and each other)
- Dramatic improvisation (situation, action)
- Narrative (storytelling, dramaturgy)
- Inner relations with text and images
- Musical improvisation (form, style)

All the work I do with singers (except for some work with improvising on repertoire) is based on their creating of the emergent musico-dramatic materials, together with the pianist, other instrumentalists or a cappella. We have focused on methods where the actors work with responding to situational questions such as: Who? Where? When? What? Why? (Johansson, 2012, Rynell, 2008, as noted above) in order to situate themselves in the interaction in a scene, creating prerequisites, context and actions in the scene together. My aim with this is to make the students focus on the outer contexts where they could use their own bodies in fictional scenes, which could provide them with material for the musical improvisations through their intentional actions in dialogue with others.

Through the years of teaching in connection with this project, I have realised that there is a great advantage for singers in music academies to explore the musical and textual improvisations separately from acting in dramatic situations, so that the singers may use their professionalised concert subject positions, interacting in the musical space. When we started to try out methods for musical/concert improvisation, many of them found new ways of improvising and were able to connect and develop more complex musical material together.

Impro-Opera performance

In August 2014, teachers and students in the Nordic improvisation project, *Improvise to Improve* created an improvised opera performance. This was the result of work with teachers and students from the Nordic music academies during one week at Metropolia University of Applied Sciences. We conducted improvisation sessions where improvisational methods were exchanged and developed. As the artistic leader of the final performance, I led the sessions with all participants and developed the set up for the final performance together with the Estonian colleagues Anne-Lies Poll and Anto Pett. Together with the ensemble I worked with techniques for musico dramatic interaction (in accordance with the techniques listed in this section and above, under Opera improvisation). The ensemble consisted of around 35 singers and instrumentalists, and I had the function of coach/live narrator, guiding the mythos and suggesting techniques for the separate scenes included.

Performative aspects

One of the purposes in my work as teacher and coach is to explore how students can try out their agencies and positions as co-creators of the artistic material in dialogue with each other. This is a clear contrast to how most classical repertoire music performance is practiced in higher musical education.

The work with the big ensemble in Helsinki gave valuable experiences. In one scene (see above) two singers perform a dialogue between God and the devil, where they negotiate the fate of a young couple. I have seldom experienced such amount of presence and listening in a large group of improvisers. The musicians followed the phrasing and dynamics of the singers with very swift turns in a rich orchestral web, while leaving transparency for the vocal lines. Meanwhile, the two singers switched between singing and speaking and shared musical motifs in their vocal dialogue. I realised that I had set my expectations too low on this group. The project indicated that classical performers have a potential to quickly learn techniques of collaborative creativity with a fast tempo through improvisation.

Video example 14 shows a scene in the opera where God and the Devil meet in order to decide the fate of a young couple.



Video example 14: God and the Devil from Impro-Opera

<https://youtu.be/qb646Cld3aM>

Video example 15 presents two concert scenes from the improvised concert- and opera performance *Mirrors of Time* in March 2015, featuring international students and teachers from Metropolia. It was the result of a one-week course and workshop including both singers and instrumentalists. The first improvisation is a game where one improviser, the percussionist Simona Piron, is interveiwed in the role as composer and conductor, describing a (presumably composed) piece. She described *Parallel Universes*, a short piece in two movements. Simona's descriptions will appear on the film. In the second improvisation the soloists Ada Alakärppä and Niina Laitinen used words from a Finnish newspaper as point of departure. I along with some of the other improvisers don't know Finnish, and used the sounding qualities of the words and the musical interaction as vantage points for the music, instead of the meanings.

Video example 15: Excerpts from *Mirrors of Time*

<https://youtu.be/jTtLCqsoS8>

Dialogues

In this part I describe and discuss my work with analysing and communicating the interactions between the improvisers in the ensembles *Operaimprovisatörerna* and *Impromans*. In some of the work, qualitative methods such as stimulated recall, transcriptions and coding of material, and video analysis have been applied. In other parts I have used writing and video editing in order to share and discuss my experience of the improvisation.

Stimulated recall method

Since the interactions between opera improvisers are vital to this practice, I conducted an interview study with the aim of collecting my colleagues' insights and perspectives. This led to the development of an analytical model, which will be used and discussed in relation to examples from the documented material. This interview study is described in Wilén (2015).

In 2013 I conducted nine interviews with members of the two ensembles *Operaimprovisatörerna*⁶⁹ and *Impromans*. In one of these, I was interviewed by Conny Antonov, who is a member of both the ensembles. The interviews were conducted during a period from August and November 2013, in Stockholm, Lund and Malmö, in cafés, hotels, and the private homes of the interviewees. The lengths of the interviews vary between one and two and a half hours. The material of the nine interviews conducted adds up to approximately thirteen hours. The work with the interview material, including the analysis has been done over a period of four months. This could have some implications for the validity, which needs to be taken into consideration. For instance, the coding processes as well as the grouping of the codes are made once, although in several different stages, and with lots of changes and reconsiderations along the way. During the process of coding and describing the codes, I have had the reason to go back into the material at some occasions, in order to retry my choices and change the codes, along with my increasing interpretation and understanding of the indications in the material. In this way my study has traits of abductive analysis (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008).

Preparation, design and analysis of the interviews

This study⁷⁰ primarily addresses the question 'What happens in the interplay between the participators during the process of opera improvisation?' Therefore, I have chosen to let the interviews address these matters in and through video examples from Oi and Impromans, by asking open questions, such as, 'what is important to you in an opera improvisation?' as well as questions relating to the specific ON project, about voice, body and gender on stage. In the interviews, my intention was to let the structure and the questions follow the lines of thinking that interested the interviewee. This resulted in a quite diverse material (not least since I learned more and more as an interviewer along the way, and managed to follow the

⁶⁹ One of the ten members in *Operaimprovisatörerna* was not able to do an interview.

⁷⁰ The major part of the results of the interview study can be found in the article 'A kaleidoscope of interactions. Researching and presenting processes of opera improvisation' (Wilén, 2015).

interviewees better). The interviews were conducted in an open structure (Kvale, 1997), and focused on a number of themes that were prepared in advance:

- How do you make/perform opera improvisation?
- Watching opera improvisation 'from outside' on video
- The interactions between singers and pianist during the performances
- The role of the pianist in opera improvisation
- The role of the music in opera improvisation
- The role of structure and agreements in opera improvisation
- Humour, tropes and laughter in opera improvisation

In the interviews with singers, the following themes were addressed:

- Relations between voice, body and gender in opera and opera improvisation
- The different perspectives of the singing performer on stage

I sent out chosen films from performances along with a short description of opera improvisation as a genre, seen from my perspective. The description was based on texts that I had written during the first years of my research studies. The interviewees were invited to comment and make changes in the text, so that we could discuss it during the interview. My aim with this text was to present a possible vantage point for how opera improvisation could be described, and also, to check if my descriptions of the genre so far would appear as relevant to my colleagues. Themes and issues from the written description were discussed in detail in one of the interviews, and to some extent in four other interviews. Although the written text was not addressed as much as I had hoped, my colleagues' comments have added valuable and important aspects to these descriptions.

The interviews were recorded on an *iPhone 4S*, and imported as sound files into the programme ELAN 4.6.1 on a MacBook computer (with the exception of the first interview, which was transcribed in Word directly from my iPhone). I listened to the material several times, and made annotations. The major part of the interviews was annotated and/or transcribed in detail. The transcriptions were made in the format of written language, since my aim was to communicate the contents of the interviews, and not the linguistic forms (Ask, 2007). Using ELAN made it possible for me to connect the transcribed comments directly to the actual parts of the sound file, so that the spoken phrase is tracked and played directly by clicking on the written transcription of the phrase. This made the connections with the spoken voices from the interviews very direct during the different stages of the analysis

(except for the first interview, which was transcribed in Word). The interviews⁷¹ were conducted in Swedish and the translations are mine, approved by the interviewees by email and/or orally.

In this study, I used a qualitative analysis method based on coding. It is a technique for categorizing meaning in a material by connecting certain tags of meaning to corresponding parts, for instance by subdividing it into a number of categories with subcategories (Kvale, 1997). From the transcriptions, I found themes that were addressed in the interviews, asking the material: 'what is important to X in opera improvisation?' These themes were annotated in ELAN on separate tiers and exported as text files into Hyperresearch (HR), where I coded them in categories (except for the first interview, which was directly coded in HR). Later, all the interviews were combined into one study, with a total of 376 codes, from which the ones focusing on interactions and strategies were chosen. The aim was then to recode them in groups in a second round of analysis. However, I could not get a sufficient overview of the codes in the program. It was not until I decided to make paper patches of the 177 codes that concerned interaction and improvisation strategies, and spread them out on a table, that I was able to make groupings in three major themes which I found relevant. These were later divided into subgroups, as described below.

My intention with the interview analysis was to turn to the actors (and experts) in the area of opera improvisation in order to identify important themes and significant concepts of interaction. These concepts can serve as a vantage point for analysis of parts of the video material. In this way, the improvisers' own descriptions as well as the analysed film sequences provides viewers (the opera improvisers themselves and the addressees of this material) with images and experiences of how the interplay in opera improvisation works. At the same time they invite viewers to see other perspectives of the work. In this way I can find ways of both achieving and communicating insights and findings in my work with the research questions at hand. This approach is in line with Frisk & Östersjö (2013), who emphasise the value of using qualitative methods in artistic research. They hold pragmatic validity as an important aspect in artistic research, claiming that 'knowledge produced is identified through action or its workability' (p. 47).

My analysis shows traits of inductive as well as abductive methods. It was inspired by grounded theory (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008), founded by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. Corbin and Strauss (1998) underline the importance of two basic elements

⁷¹ This is the case also in the other interview excerpts of this material.

in this approach. The first is asking questions, with the aim to advance understanding of theoretical issues, and the second is making comparisons in order to open up to thinking about dimensions and properties of different categories. Analysis of data is conducted on two levels. On one level, the researcher focuses the actual words uttered in the situation. On the second level, the researcher deals with how to conceptualise these words. This may be seen as a variant of the work done by Rostvall and West (2001), who analysed interviews in order to collect concepts that were consequently used in analyses of example material.

Outside the practice, inside the mind?

The films were chosen in order to serve as a starting point for discussions and concrete examples, as kinds of stimulated recall (Haglund, 2003) sessions. At first, I thought that the fact that the films were recorded some time before the interview session would be a disadvantage to the project. The track of time would have made the memories of the performances vague, so that interviewees would not be able to remember exactly how they thought or what they did at that point. However, my aim with the interviews was not to try to track down what really occurred inside the opera improviser's minds at the time (Haglund, 2003). Instead, the films served as a common vantage point for discussion. Since we often have discussions during rehearsal and performance work, adding the films constituted a joint step into a distanced position, outside the practice but inside our minds as opera improvisers, and in the partly new roles as interviewer and interviewee, while still being colleagues and friends. I strived to keep the character of the interviews as open as possible, while addressing the themes which I had chosen to focus. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) note that the contents of an interview might suffer if the interviewer tries to control the process too much. I could perceive evident indications on how this worked, during the course of the interviews.

Over the years we have recorded a lot of opera improvisation material, but this has rarely been used by the ensembles. There might be different reasons for this. As repertoire opera singers and classical musicians, we are used to evaluate our technical abilities in terms of vocal performances, sound and interpretational achievements, from recordings of our own work, or from feedback from teachers, coaches, directors and others. Therefore, the participants are used to listen to and watch themselves as repertoire singers performing works.

As opera improvisers, we work with developing interactional and dramaturgical structures, creating circumstances for the work. We rarely or never evaluate our performances in terms of qualitative aspects of singing, playing or acting, as often is the case in interpretative work. This goes well in hand with how Potter (1998)

differs between developing vocal genres, where the aim is to investigate prerequisites for change and others aiming merely to (re)create performance prototypes. When we rehearse and perform opera improvisation we usually do not use video or audio recordings as tools in the work, except for documentation. An important part of rehearsing in opera improvisation is about trying out different techniques. The aim is to investigate various circumstances and conditions in order to create open structures and agreements that open up to possibilities for the improvisers during performance. This work is evaluated during rehearsals in the format of joint discussions and reflections about how the improvisers conceive the work. Instead of talking about 'how did I do?' or 'how did it sound and/or look?' we talk about 'how did it feel?' or 'how did the interaction work?'. Watching or listening to recordings of the work from an outside perspective rarely occurred at all in the working processes.

During the interviews we became aware that watching the recordings added something new to our working process. We could discuss and reflect upon experiences and issues from an outside perspective. In this way, my meetings with the colleagues and their reactions on watching improvisations from an outer perspective have confirmed the impression that we usually take an inner stance as vantage point for reflections during the work.

Watching recorded material of performances is not usually included in the working process of the opera improviser, and thus affected the improvisers in a new way. My conclusion is that a time distance to the improvised performance can bring a valuable advantage, since it enhances the 'watching from outside' perspective even more for us as practitioners.

Another important factor has come up for me as a researcher and member of the ensemble Operaimprovisatörerna. The project ON emanated from an idea that I had had for some time, and I took the initiative to conduct the project with the ensemble. During ON, which was conducted during a great part of the year 2012, I acted as producer and artistic leader during parts of the work. This gave me an important role as an outer eye in the ensemble during this period. An interview situation is often based on an asymmetrical power relation between the parts (Kvale, 1997). If I would have conducted the interviews earlier, it could have affected my role in the ensembles in a negative way, since this would have given me a dominating position for a long time.

The result of the interviews was later presented in a session with the ensemble *Oi*. In this way, my findings were recontextualised into the artistic practice, as a way of continuing and sharing the creative learning processes. This could be seen as action

research (Bresler, 2006). It can also be compared to the creative dialogues between participants in a project described by Johansson (2013) that ‘opened up the space for new insights and for knowledge transfer’ (p. 30). It is also a way of contextualizing and mirroring the subjective voice of my earlier writings on opera improvisation in a multitude of voices, to create a higher validity in this project (Frisk & Östersjö, 2013).

I. Results of the interview investigation — presence, relations and traditions

In this section follows a general outline of the analytic results from the interview study. The original analysis that lays ground for the IAM model is further presented in one of the articles (Wilén, 2015).⁷² Below I present a general outline of the results. It is followed by a new summary based on a second analysis of the interview material in the article.⁷³

The analysis resulted in a description of three main aspects of interplay in opera improvisation. These aspects are not intended as complementary categories, but as overlapping, since they often appear in parallel in the interaction.

The codings are based on the interview analysis, in combination with my preunderstanding of the practice. The interviewees are anonymised and are assigned letters A to I. Since the number of participants in the study is limited to 11 persons, I have omitted gender information, thus letting the participants remain as anonymous as possible. This was done for ethical reasons, since it offered the improvisers possibilities to speak freely and occasionally raise critical views during the interviews. In their comments, the improvisers often shifted perspectives from describing the dramatic scene to their own experiences as improvisers in the scene. This supports my assumption that opera improvisers interact within parallel layers of situations, which affect each other, thereby creating the improvised material in a dialectic way.

The material is divided into three general categories including certain quotes.

⁷² Some parts of these analyses are published there.

⁷³ In the section about tropes you will also find some material from the interviews, chosen in 2017.

Here and now

The first category focuses interactional aspects of the improvisational processes. The sub codes cover notions of taking turns, clarifying offers and matters of presence and closeness in relation to the other actors. The improvisers stress the centrality of focusing on presence in the situation at hand. They point to the importance of listening to inner intentions, images and musical thoughts while still keeping an open mind, and being ready to join suggestions and actions from others.

S/he succeeds in pushing this one step further, by taking a greater risk. That gives me more impulses and I'm triggered into, wow, we make a journey together, and that's where you want to be. We don't know where it will end, but we make a journey together.

Several of the singers note that they often follow the pianist's choices and suggestions when it comes to choices on stage. This is interesting, since there is an ongoing discussion in *Oi* about how to give the singers more musical space.

I think you should rather be silent when you are in panic as an improviser, and pass the ball go the music instead. After a little while this becomes quite clear, and after a few seconds Gregor will see that 'I have the ball, he is not going to say a word' and then he has space just to deepen his sense of the scene.

The sharing of responsibility and keeping agreements is vital for creating safety and to confirm the fellow improvisers.

From what I remember we had two fine duets where I perceived that we gave each other space, so that you got to sing for a while, and then I got to sing... There was an interaction that worked well.

In order to be together 'in the now' it is important to dare, to takes risks and sometimes act irrationally. The letting go of responsibility opens up to sharing energy and gives the courage to go all in, and act earnestly, without distance.

What I'm really passionate about, or when I enjoy it the most is when we find a flow together as fellow players. And you don't even have to be on stage, you can stand on the side and see that, well, bang, bang, bang, and a fantastic duet. What a setup, I'll take it, wonderful! Oh, I 'm so lonely, or whatever. I have a wonderful reason to sing a song.

It might be a bit hard to get all the brains, souls, everything to interplay. And everything that you bring to the gig or the performance, everything is there. So of course perfect harmony is really hard to achieve. But when to dare to bring discomfort and anguish and divorces and just: there you go! And enjoy the fall. That's cool. But it's so scary that you almost die.⁷⁴

If one improviser starts to act with distance s/he can sometimes use humour as a way of 'safing'.

I can experience that I am more stressed and don't manage or dare to take in an audience for example. It blurs a little, or is a bit hazy and unclear. Or you just go along and it's all merry and jolly. And that might work sometimes. But you might miss out on the more finely tuned jamming... I imagine that you're not entirely open. Like when you are in an audition, and you might feel that it can become blurry. You really go for it but you end up a bit above everything, in some way.

The distanced acting can affect the other singers negatively very fast and create feelings of discomfort which risk the collegial relations between the improvisers. Many point to sharing moments of uncertainty and feelings of being alive with the audience. This is seen as a unique quality in opera improvisation (in relation to repertoire performance) that should be used more. One of the improvisers underline the importance of keeping a high energy level and intensity in the musical approach, in order to 'make it opera' as compared to improvised theatre with music.

Expectations and contrast

This category includes ways of addressing and playing with the performed content and shared expectations and connotations within the frame of the situation and the context. The improvisers use words like break, twist, clash, contrast or to challenge a situation in unexpected ways, by playing with images and shared musical and stylistic codes. One of the improvisers note significant expectations from the audience on how s/he is supposed to act on stage while taking on a character in relation to his/her appearance and gender. To make other choices than the ones expected in the gendered discourse requires courage from the actor, and an ability to make quick decisions.

⁷⁴ Also quoted in Wilén, 2015.

You can make an analogy, of metaphor: you enter, and the audience sees who you are and what you are. Your sex, your size, your whatever. Then they immediately hold a suit up, schscht! Here, these suits are the ones you get to choose from. Here's the funny suit... you're a man, here's a power suit, here's your... this is what's offered. It's an offer from the audience. To jump into one of these suits... is easy, because they are ready. It's you who makes the choice, as an actor. But to choose something else takes that you have a referential frame. So you can say; no, I brought my own suit, here's how I look. And then they can become a little confused. Perhaps this takes more courage as an actor, to dare to stand up for it...⁷⁵

In line with this, one singer notes that the improvisers, at times, deliberately choose to play with the notion of difference between opera as genre and realistic acting. This is often done by creating a framework which represents a big contrast between the classical mode of singing and the realistic mode of acting.

It takes energy to sing, and when the energy isn't in the language or in the situation something clashes. Sometimes when we play with genres I experience that we in Operaimprovisatörerna play with the notion that a certain situation really isn't fit for singing. We create a dramatic setup by charging it so that we can be motivated to sing a Wagner phrase. It takes something to go in and use the big expression, and we play a little with that.⁷⁶

Meanwhile s/he comments that it's common among opera improvisers to act within a realistic frame, often connected to everyday environments. This creates a contradictory relation, and a good performance is therefore related to a high level of energy, which has to be above a certain critical point.

Well, it's a paradox... Opera, in itself, is not realism, and it works really well when you have twisted it a few rounds.

The twist, or turn, is one way to make easy comical points, which in some cases is consciously chosen in order to entertain the audience. It can also be a way of expressing distance to the self on stage as well as challenging the operatic bodies. Sometimes the turn takes place as a result of an unexpected reaction from the audience. One improviser describes a performance of a collage where s/he made a solo that was intended as serious, but where the audience started to laugh.

⁷⁵ Also in Wilén, 2015.

⁷⁶ Also in Wilén, 2015.

Yes, I remember my own feeling and experience of this... I wanted to say something here, I remember. This story about what does it matter if Mummy tells you that she likes you, what does that matter on the school yard, when you're just a little nobody. This about being bullied or so... The funny thing is that the audience starts to laugh...

I remember that I was provoked when the audience was laughing in that situation, and I've thought about this several times. Do people laugh at me because I'm funny? Or do they laugh because I was funny before, and then they expect this to be funny as well? Or do I do things that I am not aware of? And here I see that I do nothing funny, from what I can see, at least.

As classical singers, the opera improvisers use their knowledge and experience from repertoire work in the improvisations. One singer notes that the roles s/he has performed have created a stock of embodied characters, which at points are put to use. To the improviser, it is not so much the choice of the traits of the character that matters, as how deeply s/he engages in the situation at hand, being in the present moment as improviser.

Now we have worked for so long that you have sort of backups with old geezers and ideas that you can sort of upload. In my brain I think that there are ready setups... and there's nothing wrong with having such a backup to be able to carry things through. But it's not at those points that the most exciting things happen I think.

On second thought, the others may also be clichés, but they have more, sort of ground and are acted more honestly. But it could be exactly the same thing. They might as well have the exact traits anyway, but it's just... Yes it's a bit strange, it could be almost exactly the same thing. But still not. But in one of the cases they bottom and feel adequate in another way.⁷⁷

Sharing and developing framework, structures and ideas

Central to the improvisers is to create common strategies in the play.

It's really nothing more complicated than this: it's about framework, framework, framework all the time... I mean, in the same way as when we work with an aria on an everyday problem: it is a very plain framework, and then we, or you, often can throw yourselves out there, because the framework is so plain in what it's about.

⁷⁷ First part also in Wilén, 2015.

These are often rooted in opera singing performance and classical repertoire as well as realistic acting techniques. The use of musical stylistic traits also renders a sense of trajectory in the musico-dramatic formats.

If you make a cadence in something quasi-romantic, you can sort of feel that, plamplam, then something new starts. Then there is a sort of culture that we have in common and relate to. We know that, it will be approximately this long...

The joint notions are also a result of a developed sense of dramaturgical development, which is based in the joint work with theatre exercises and musical improvisation based on different styles. In order to tell a story together the actors create longer lines by being aware of all that occurs, in order to refer to it later, by linking the opera backwards. Creating a common framework gives security and quality, as does clear scenic choices and keeping to previous agreements.

No I, would say that in general I think quite little... And it happens quite often that I have really forgotten where we are going (laughs). No, in general I am more based on being in the present, in the emotions and what happens right now. Therefor I think it's important to have stations, or landings in the flow.

Some improvisers choose to relate to conventions and idioms, claiming that this along with analysing and pruning the improvisations renders quality. This improviser shows a particular severe approach to what is expressed on stage. S/he experiences that others do more rather than less when they are insecure in a situation.

I think that when we are unsure as improvisers, many of us create a lot of text in order to find a frame, since as improvisers we feel safe in a frame... if you look at written opera, and compare it also to film, it is a material that has been elaborated. There the text and everything that is said has been analysed. Everything you say is important, and you just leave out the things that are insignificant. You have time to erase these things, and really just say the things that lead the action forward, and this is what we need to learn, I think.

At the same time, there is always a need for balance, so that the inner image does not block impulses from others. One improviser records how a colleague in a scene had a very clear image, driving the action forward. On the one hand, it rendered

safety in the scene in terms of content; on the other hand, this tempo and drive created a certain stress and made it difficult to feel grounded.

To sing with X here is like eating ice cream. And at the same time: sometimes I think, why am I in such a hurry? And I think this might be the reason. S/he conducts things in a way, or initiates so much that you can't really sink into things in the same way. Even though you can be sure that there is always something. You won't end up hanging by yourself, thinking 'this is embarrassing'. But I feel that, no, now we are lifting a bit, can't we just...

II. The improvisers' inner images

In this section I present two versions of conversations between the improvisers, from dialogues immediately after the improvisations. The aim is to give a picture of how the making of improvisations is perceived by us as performers. This implies setting our inner associations and images in relation to how the improvisations actually turned out. There are video links to the scenes, and these should be watched in the order that they are presented.

Operaimprovisatörerna: How does it sound when you chop a tree?

This is a stimulated recall session made during the production *Sista Minuten* for a young audience at Gävle Konserthus in October 2016.⁷⁸ The session was led by me. This scene takes place in a woodsman's cabin in the forest. The woodsman, Lars (Sara), nervously awaits his boss Desideria (Alexandra). Shortly, a quarrel takes place where Desideria finally forces Lars to promise to cut down the forest so that a shopping mall can be built on the place. When Lars argues that an elk lives in the forest, Desideria declares that she hopes to shoot it.

The scene starts in recitative, and after a while the pianist Gregor invites the conductor and orchestra to join in an atonal improvisation. Due to the loud orchestral dynamics in the scene, some of the text from the singers was hard to perceive for all. Although information went missing at times (especially for the horn player), the performers in the conversation still perceived the interaction as enjoyable. Even though the performers did not have a joint conception of the

⁷⁸ The participants are Alexandra Orrgård Solén, Linus Flogell and Sara Wilén (singers), Eric Solén (conductor) and Göran Hülphers (horn player). The improvised opera was 27 minutes long.

emerging story, some moments of exceptional timing between music and action took place.

Gregor describes that he wanted to go for a new strategy, by giving the orchestra more dynamic space than usual. For the first time he chose to be very mimetic in his conducting, acting with depicting gestures. The singers on their hand had spontaneously associated the instrumental music in the scene with the opera *Wozzeck* (by Alban Berg) and note that they both had chosen to act on the differences in their power positions, in order to create clear contrasts. Sara mentions that she could not hear the information that Alexandra gave in the scene, and Alexandra describes how she tried very hard to make the crucial information heard, by repeating it and waiting for a dynamic gap in the orchestra.

Alexandra: I also slightly panicked because I felt there's not a chance that it's possible to hear what I say. So I just, I need to repeat this... give me a chance, give me a gap now! I just sat and waited... but at the same time there is a sort of limit to how much I can sort of say the same, so I still tried to be, and find something. Now if something important comes I need to find a gap, but there really never was a gap.

Sara notes that the atonal musical style made the singers assume a scenic interaction that kept developing further, without repetitions and stylizations of the text (as in other classical music styles).

The horn player Göran describes how his section had a very hard time hearing the actual text from the singers, since the woodwinds were seated far back on stage.⁷⁹

Göran: We sit in a cluster there in the back all the time, and it's Eric who guides everything we do. We can't be a part of what you do all the time, we have a full focus on Eric all the time, and he is amazing in his way of showing, really, an applause, not many conductors would dare to show what he does. This is really fun. That makes us very, a hundred percent with Eric. We can't be with you at all...

Linus (turns to Göran): How would you interpret a...? (shows the gesture of chopping a tree).

Göran: On the first one you wonder, but already on the second beat you've understood that, ah, he's a woodsman. Zock! (laughs).

⁷⁹ This was different compared to the 2014 performances, which took place in a theatre. In 2014, he was able to take part much more, joining in the performance with /improvised/ sounds.

Sara leads the discussion over to asking Eric if he thinks that the music became mimetic when he used that kind of gestures.

Eric: ... this was the first time that it became descriptive from my side, if you will, describing an event so that, 'now I'm a woodsman, no we're supposed to be elk, here are two quarrelling woodpeckers'. This is probably the first time we've done it like this. On other occasions it has been more of an attempt from my side to translate what I imagine... a sound image in my head that I try to translate into a gesture that they can understand.

If I want growling in the double basses and 'plupplupplupp' in the bassoons, or I want: 'donck!' pizzicatos in the reed, I try to embody this through the sound images that I have... this was in that way the first, and unique, because here my gesture actually became: I depict an elk! I depict a woodsman! and it was the first time.

Sara describes how she uses the concept of the dramatic situation in her work, considering the questions: Who? What? Where? Why? How? and What relation? in her work with creating a character. She relates the tree chopping gesture as being descriptive, an answer to the question What? it depicts, and what function the music has there. At the same time, there is a 'how?' in how Solén uses his body, or how the musicians interpret this. Göran notes that Eric in a way came to function as a gestural score for the orchestra, with similarities to a written score in many ways.

Göran: Yes, that's what he's also showing, how it is. You can chop with an axe in many different ways. And we follow him and that's what's interesting, since we are a whole orchestra and all are supposed to do the same. This is basically the task for the orchestra. We listen intensely to each other so that all of us do the same thing. And that's where Eric is so important... he creates the emotion... he shows the atmosphere and we create it.

Sara leads the discussion further into inner images of music. Although Eric gave the orchestra images that they made into sounds, to her as singer in that moment it definitely appeared as abstract music, with vast spans and gestures. Alexandra agrees, neither she had any idea about the concrete images going on behind them in the orchestra during the scene.

Sara: And it gave us something, but I had no idea that you were elks and woodpeckers and woodsmen, or did you know?

Alexandra: No...

Sara: ... so the layers were there, but on the other way around so to say, than you might think. You play a clear image and I interpret this as an intention, more than I say a word and you play it.

Linus mentions that it made him think of poetry, where you can paint with the words, and everything does not necessarily need to be explained at all times. Sara agrees and notes that the words in a sense actually had that poetic function, since she could not perceive Alexandra's words, but rather how Alexandra expressed them. Alexandra concurs and adds that the vocal parts in the scene perhaps were unnecessary altogether, because the orchestral piece worked so well. Solén does not agree with that, since he perceives that all parts provided the scene with a fine energy.

Eric: This is really interesting, because I pick up elks, I'm in the woods so I pick up these things and illustrate an elk to the orchestra. They see an elk, the whole orchestra moos like an elk, but of course it doesn't sound like an elk mooing. And how does it sound when you chop a tree? Of course the orchestra can't... but it still creates an emotion for the orchestra, that produces a rather unison sound. But for you who don't see me, it does something completely other. But this doesn't mean that it's bad... no one said it had to sound like, that everyone need to understand that it's an elk. So it was an incredibly intense scene. Although you came up with lots of information that you couldn't hear, it became an energy that actually was brilliant, I think! And then we had flow... we nailed the ending!

Below follow two versions of this scene, in order to give the viewer a clear image of the interactions. In Video example 16 the scene is filmed with one camera. Video example 17 shows a mixed version from two cameras.



Video example 16: *An Elk!* One camera
https://youtu.be/XwOQOt_ecOg

Video example 17: *An elk!* Mixed cameras
<https://youtu.be/GBCUCVqbNWc>

Apparently, the improvisers, even though they were not interacting in a development in the same narrative (as is the case in opera improvisation and lyrical improvisation with piano) found successful ways of interacting. The conductor and the horn player describe how the conductor almost took on roles, portraying physical actions within a situated context by giving incitements to the orchestra.

Lyrical improvisation: experiencing and negotiating inner images

This stimulated recall session took place in Liljeforssalen at Malmö Academy of Music in August 2013. I have chosen to present it differently, in order to give an alternative experience of the improvisation as process than in the example above. First, I would like you to listen to the music while you read the improvised text below.

1. *Listen* to the sound of the film on this link, and read the text of the impromans below.

Video example 18: *Bank*, sound only
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXfcbd13nM>

Bank

*The ice lies thin
Over the plashes*

Glittering bubbles stuck

The air was shut in there, last year

Swirled freely over the fields, the meadows

Sailed up through the power of the clouds

Through the eroding gunmetal whirls

The skies

*Then shot down through the glimmering lights
Of the atmosphere.*

*Driving down without knowing,
without suspecting.*

*Halt. Halt.
Remain.
I can open.*

*Black edges on the snow.
Memories of the cars
passing by.*

Everything, everything sticks, stays.

Dikesren

*Isen ligger tunn
Över pölarne.*

*Glitrande bubblor som
fastnat*

*Luften stängdes in där förra
året.*

*Svirvlade fritt över fälten,
ängarna*

*Seglade upp ur molnens
kraft*

*Igenom de luckrande
blågråa virvlar*

Skyarna

*For sedan nedåt
genom atmosfärens
glitrande ljus*

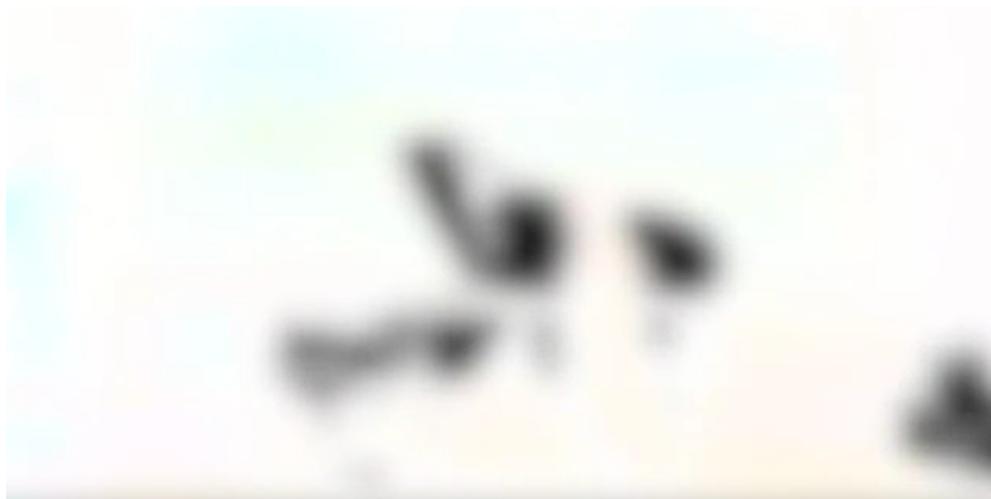
*Farande neråt utan att
veta
utan att ana*

*Halt. Halt,
stanna kvar
jag kan öppna*

*Svarta kanter på snön
Bilarnas minnen
som passerat förbi*

*Allting, allting fastnar,
stannar.*

2. Watch the link below



Video example 19: *Bank*, commented
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFTfpXrUho0>

The comments in the clip above derive from a session on August 27th 2013. After the interview, we performed the *impromans* (improvised song) *Bank*, a word suggested by Conny. Immediately after the performance, we watched it together on the video camera and made comments on our thoughts and experiences during the interaction. The comments are thus as close to the performance in time as possible, which might give more reliability to the improvisers' memories of their inner images and thoughts at a certain point in the improvisation.

The following conversation is taken from this session:

Sara: What is an *impromans*?

Conny: Well, it's just like you say, you don't have to enact a narrative, you can be in the image, like this. A Lied is often like this ... I think it's very fine, that here, in contrast to when you make an opera scene, there are much more dynamics. Maybe we should consider this when we improvise opera scenes, too. There are more dynamic differences, because in these *impromanses* so many colours are created.

Sara: I can experience that it is to be in a now. And you can be inside different layers of that now, but not drive it forward, because then you would easily

push, and then the voice pushes too. Then I would see it from outside in some sense, and, schsch, push it...

Conny: It is an *impromans*, like an image of the moment, like that: you zoom in, in this case on a frozen bank, and what's there. And as you do, you take in the things that you see around it as well, and an emotion... I couldn't quite hear what you sang there. What was the emotion?

Sara: Melancholy, I think. I didn't know I would say this, but now I did. But the thing about action and feeling... they can be situated inside each other. To me it is about creating, or, seeing, not to create but to see, or perceive images, and experience them through the instrument, which then communicates. I don't have to communicate actively, in terms of standing as a kind of presenter at the same time, but it 'the instrument' is the thing that it does, in some way. The medium is the message... (laughs).

An *impromans* is here described as a process, not as a fixed musical format or object. As improvisers, we relate to inner images that are to some extent shared, to some extent individual. We interact in the musical space through our instruments, responding both to the inner image(s) and to each other, in a vocal concert approach where the performing body is not in focus as carrier of meaning.

III. Action analysis

In order to test the assumption that opera improvisers use stage actions as their vantage point and change between mythos and praxis perspectives, I created an action analysis of the final scene in the improvised opera *Terminator* from a public performance of the production *Moments of Opera* in September 2010. In the analysis, I used theoretical concepts based on writings by Sjöström (2007), Stanislavskij (as quoted in Rumjantsev, 1993) and presentations given in a course in October 2010 by Fredrik Haller, teacher at Malmö Theatre Academy.

The scene is linked in two versions below. Video example 20 has English text and in Video example 21 the actions are texted to present the action analysis. I use the following concepts: action (for what a person does) will (for the person's overall will in the situation) and evaluation point (*värderingspunkt*, my translation) for a point where a person has received new information and has to make a choice (Haller, 2010).

The improvised opera *Terminator* was 36 minutes long, with the following mythos action, in short: A lonely, poor mother, S, tries in every way to get hold of a new

computer game for her son, who is not in her custody. In the end she has been arrested, as she has been tricked by a fence, M, who blames her for everything. One man, U⁸⁰, has followed the woman from a distance and finally steps up and reveals the truth to save the woman. He declares that he loves her, and in this final scene she tries to open her heart to his love, thereby finally facing her own tragic situation.



Video example 20: Terminator, texted
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RLz8pgBbdA>



Video example 21: Terminator, action analysis,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psMqLTUcin0>

⁸⁰ Performed by a woman.

During the action analysis I came to the conclusion that however useful the model is for analysing the praxis perspective (inside the dramatic situation), I needed more finely calibrated tools for describing what is happening in musical terms. A singing phrase or action can be underlined or coloured by something in the music that indicates something else than what is said and done on stage (or the other way around). The total structure of vocal lines, words, movements and notes can be compared to sequences of action that are in harmony or contrast against each other. In conclusion, although the action analysis clarified the structural and interactional features of opera improvisation, especially on praxis and mythos levels, all the aspects of the musical interaction within this model proved difficult to grasp.

IV. Interplay analysis

During the groupings of the codes in the interview study, I saw similarities between the three main themes and Nettelbladt's (2013) pragmatic model (Wilén, 2015) of how language is constructed in dialogue by means of pragmatic description and analysis. I therefore used the codes as vantage points for a new sort of action analysis, focusing on the improvisational interplay. I started by coding some of the films that were discussed during the interviews, from the performance 120728 (see below).

My intention with this model is to create a platform for interplay analysis, Interplay Analysis Model (IAM). In turn, this creates possibilities for communicating aspects of the interplay between the improvisers, while taking the emerging process and the creative and collaborative negotiations into account. IAM is based on the shared knowledge and techniques used by Oi, who have common agreements on the musical and performative discourses of Western classical repertoire. Oi also agree on the definition of concepts such as, for example, action, dramatic situation, dramaturgical structures and audience interaction. Some of these are articulated by the group, as described in the section 'Opera improvisation with words', above. However, many of them are used but not articulated in the common work, and it is these that I track with my analyses. Since the model is based on interviews with two ensembles, one opera ensemble and one concert duo,⁸¹ the model can cover both operatic and concert performance. However, since the concert performance format enables interaction only in the musical situation and not in the dramatic situation, it is not possible to know what intentions the improvisers have during these improvisations. For this reason, I have focused mainly on the aspects of interplay

⁸¹ Impromans occasionally performs opera improvisation solo scenes.

that I perceived in the film analyses. In order to access the ideas of the improvisers, I would need to analyse the films together with the fellow improvisers, using the codes. Even so, many intuitive choices would not be possible to track, even for us as improvisers, since we are mostly not aware of them. The thematic groups are the same as in the interview study and are coloured as follows:



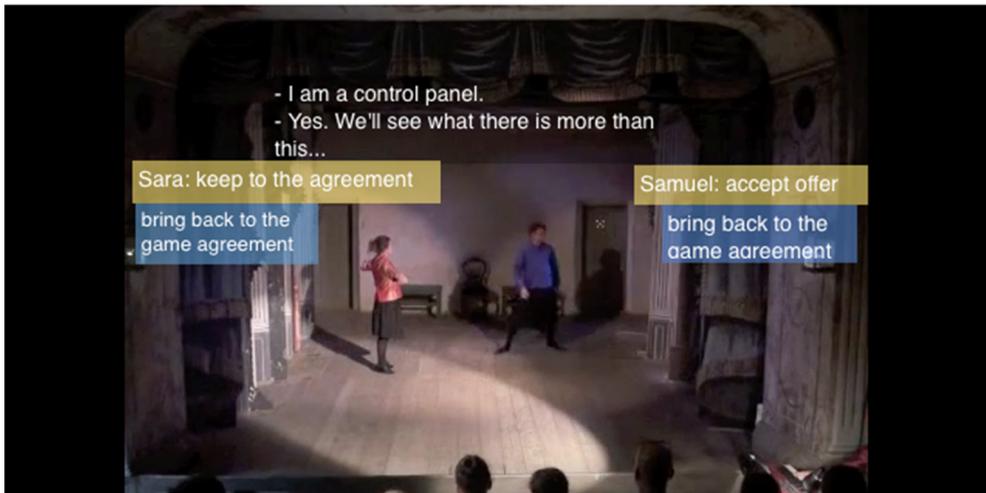
The coding of the material is a combination of codes emanating from the interview study and open coding of the video example at hand, in relation to the categories above. The leading question has been: *How do the improvisers do what they do?* Importantly, this analysis differs a lot from the action analysis mentioned above. The action analysis tracks the actions of the characters, not the improvisers. With action analysis, the (vocal, musical and physical) actions that instigate shifts between situational layers that I perceive as crucial in the work of the opera improvisers are impossible to track. This is the main reason why I developed IAM.

I coded each action in one category at a time, although the actions can have more than one function, and belong to more than one of the three categories. The priority during the coding was to present what I interpret as the main function of the action at hand.

Below follow two examples of the IAM analysis with three categories used in 2013 (also published in Wilén, 2015). The coding is done with annotations directly on Youtube. Coloured boxes close to the improvisers mark their names during the time range of the action. When watching these analysis examples, it is possible to stop the film and read the labels in detail on the still image. It is also possible to watch the film as a whole, in order to get an image of how the communication flows in the interplay processes from an improviser's perspective.

Video example 22 (Wilén, 2015) is the first scene of an improvised opera performed at Vadstena Gamla Teater in July 2012, as part of the project ON. The word is given from the audience as a response to a request for a place. The improvisers have

previously agreed to use the technique 'I am', where the singers enter one by one, making solos in song and movement, followed by a tutti part. Since this technique has set rules for the movement interaction and does not include staged dramatic interaction between the singers in character (as musical personae), I have chosen to focus on musical aspects of the interaction in this analysis.



Video example 22: IAM analysis, I am technique *Space station*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EffKSGWnOwA>

In a later development of the IAM model I have added a fourth parameter (Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a), power relations. Johnstone (1999) sees the negotiation of power relations in an improvised scene as central. In the video analyses of the project, GoL (2016), power relations emerged as a central strategy in the work of the ensemble.

Video example 23 comes from the final scene of the improvised opera *Gravity of Life II* performed in Magle konserthus, Lund in October 2016,⁸² including the fourth category. The analysis is made with coloured text lines in the video editing programme, Adobe Premiere Pro. This is a new analysis of the scene, which apart from some minor changes aims to be visually clearer compared to in Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a.

In this scene, the husband (who hitherto has acted as a very meek character) has just found out that a missing relative was murdered by a neighbour a long time ago. The

⁸² GoL 161027 was performed at Magle Konserthus, Lund, with the choir from the Lars Erik Larsson College in Lund, and conductor, Sofia Söderberg.

wife has known about this for a while, but has not had the courage to reveal the truth to her husband since the neighbour has threatened her.

Video example 23: IAM analysis, final scene *Gravity of Life II*
<https://youtu.be/biJ7qWD9Q84>

The outcome of the IAM analyses

The main result of the IAM analysis is that it gave a possibility to code the musico-dramatic interactions as vocal *and* musical actions. As noted above, musical analysis has mainly focused on music as material, often ignoring the competences that performers bring to the situation. The model provides an alternative way of analysing performance material since it focuses on the actions of the performers, not the musical material per se. Performers play a significant role in the creation and performance of music, and these analytical categories have made it possible to detect and categorise aspects of performers' vocal and musical actions. In the examples given below, I have chosen against analysing all aspects of the actions in the clip, in order to achieve clarity. The first category is marked yellow in the film clip and relates to:

Here and now, interactional aspects

This first category in the IAM analysis points to how the improvisers take turns by giving space to each other. I have coded this as awaits (Video examples 23, 24). The singers do this by, for instance, remaining silent and/or attentive to the others. Gregor listens or awaits the singers' information and actions by holding chords, remaining silent, but most commonly by repeating a single note in the middle register.⁸³ I have observed this musical action in performances over the years, but it has never been discussed by the opera group. This is an example of how the improvisers interact intuitively. It is probable that they are unaware of many of these kinds of signals and of their use.

Another way of signalling presence and confirming the other improviser is to repeat musical motifs shortly after they occur, as a mirroring action or singing/playing in

⁸³ Video example 23, Gregor awaits 00:30 after Sara's line at ('And stop putting it on me').
<https://youtu.be/biJ7qWD9Q84>

Video example 24, IAM analysis, excerpt Tosca Scarpia improvisation. Gregor awaits Sara at 00:10 ('Do you know what is at stake here?'). <https://youtu.be/qZn1QSJYGRs>

unison as Gregor with singers in Video examples 22-25.⁸⁴ The collage technique presented in 'Glass' above (Video example 3) is built on the improvisers' repetitions of each other's suggested phrases.

In an impromans at Skissernas Museum (Video example 26) in October 2015, Sara and Conny make a unison legato phrase together at the end of a soft legato part, on the words 'säger mig' (Tell me) which become a transition, a joint preparation for the immediately following contrasting dramatic part.⁸⁵

A clear example of turn-taking in terms of repeated mirroring in physical movement is given in Video example 27, from *Sista Minuten* in 2014. Sara and Alexandra impersonate two meerkats who try to tell a boy (David) that his friend, the elephant, has been taken by a poacher. Starting with a status negotiation about who will start to talk to the boy, they begin to mirror each other's movements, so that the one who sticks up her head is singing while the other one waits for her turn. The brief recitative part of about 15 seconds is a cappella, with ten swift shifts. On the eighth shift, Sara makes a longer phrase, which is confirmed by Gregor and Alex in a dominant chord, leading to a little allegro trio.

⁸⁴ Video example 22 shows many examples, for instance: Gregor synchronizes with Alexandra's phrasing at 2:29 ('speck of dust') and mirrors her phrasing at 02:41 ('and a little hair').
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfFKSGWnOwA>

Video example 23: Gregor and Linus make a unison movement at 01:20 ('But why didn't you say anything?'). <https://youtu.be/bij7qWD9Q84>

Video example 24. Gregor and Samuel make a unison movement at 00:39 ('...that you may not have tried yet.'). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZn1QSIYGRs&feature=youtu.be>

Video example 25 IAM analysis *Miss Krappelstein*, beginning. Gregor shadows Linus in the recitative at 00:04 ('I'm sorry, but I'm not her'). <https://youtu.be/efzdoNG0Ubc>

⁸⁵ Video example 26 *My love* (sound only), at 01:24
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sxlp7Mwkrjo&feature=youtu.be>



Video example 27: *Where's the Elephant?*
<https://youtu.be/Ym1mUG5vLws>

A musical turn-taking is exemplified in the scene *Miss Krappelstein* (Video example 2)⁸⁶. The dramatic tension grows at 01:32 as the herd boy hesitates to sit down on the throne, risking being drawn into the underworld. The queen and the herd boy take turns singing a two-line theme which is repeated twice (Linus riming on Sara's line):

Queen: 'Jag vågar inte titta!' (I don't dare to watch!)

Herd boy: 'Jag vågar inte sitta!' (I don't dare to sit!)

The second category is:

Expectations and contrast

When I conducted the analyses, I found that the improvisers often create contrast as a means to make twists. This can be musical contrast, to indicate change,⁸⁷ or dramatic contrast to achieve power.⁸⁸ In *Walpurgis Fire* above (Video example 4) a

⁸⁶ Video example 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSyu8HA3EqE&feature=youtu.be>

⁸⁷ Video example 22: Alexandra contrasts in musical phrasing, at 2:25. ('I am a little speck of dust')
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfFKSGWnOwA>

⁸⁸ Video example 23: Linus takes power by voice at: 00:10 ('Murdered?!')
<https://youtu.be/biJ7qWD9O84>

brief exclamation phrase, both in the piano and in the vocal part from the dramatic start of the song, creates a dramatic turn away from the even rhythmical piano part and long lyrical singing phrases.⁸⁹

A turn can also be used to shift from a fictional, dramatic situation to a comical, rhetorical situation in relation to the audience, by twisting it with humour. The improviser can use it in order to ‘escape’ from an uncomfortable dramatic situation. A turn may also be seen as a means for deconstructing the high-brow, stylised format of an operatic situation in relation to the dramatic situation at hand. Singing a sentence such as ‘I’ve made some tea’ with an operatic voice has comical, almost absurd implications, especially as in this example, where a couple argue about a murder.⁹⁰ Still, if it had been a family situation in a theatre performance, the same line would not have been considered absurd for an actor to speak with his/her voice, since it lies so close to the private voice.

A use of wit as twist can give intertextual associations through music, such as the dialogue in the very first example of this dissertation, when Sara as the queen sings ‘Sua madre!’ as an association to the phrase used by all characters in the sextet scene of Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*, when Susanna discovers that Marcellina is the mother of Figaro.⁹¹

A twist can also give a satirical tone. In the scenes from ON, the norms and traditions of vocal opera institutional performance were parodied, for instance, when Sara (performing Scarpia) used and parodied the body language of a baritone character stereotype (Video example 24) or the *Death of the tropes* scene (Video example 30), where the opera voice *Fach* is being parodied by the improvisers. Another example of satire is the improvised solo opera scene between Don Giovanni and the Italian politician, Berlusconi,⁹² where Don Giovanni seduces Berlusconi in

Video example 24: Samuel turns by taking power with voice dynamics at 0:22 (‘Scarpia! This game! We’ve played it long enough!’)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZn1OSJYGRs&feature=youtu.be>

⁸⁹ Video example 4: At 00:17 (‘The smoke! Reaks!’) and in the return of the same musical theme at 01:08 (‘You left me!’). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_4M7f9FCMA&feature=youtu.be

⁹⁰ Video example 23: Linus turns at refers to having made tea during the conflict about a murder at 00:29 (‘I’ve made some tea!’).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biJ7qWD9Q84&feature=youtu.be>

⁹¹ Video example 2: Sara’s line at 02:40. The association was mostly intended for OI and the orchestra, since the young audience is unlikely to have seen Mozart’s opera, especially in the original language. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tOO7uVf_LU&feature=youtu.be

⁹² Video example 28: *A meeting between Don Giovanni and Berlusconi*, Impromans performance at EPARM research conference in Belgrade, 2011. <https://youtu.be/WH4kVRIP3Uk>

order to get cultural funding for his opera house. A third example (which was a more absurd twist five years ago than sadly is the case in Europe today) is Samuel's choice of impersonating a *svastika* in the starting scene of the improvised opera parody *The Schools* (Video example 29).⁹³

The obvious dramatic turns given here can be compared to what Gefors (2011) names as 'steps', (*steg*, p. 81, my translation) namely a human action in the drama connected to a noticeable musical change (*ibid*). However, in his analysis of composed opera, Gefors focuses on the dramaturgical layer of the music drama as material, which leaves the performative aspects of the performers and their artistic choices in performance aside. Rather, these turns, or oscillations, can be seen as the moments of re-keying or shaping the contextual framework as crucial aspect of pragmatic language communication (Robinson, 2009). In these shifts between situational orders, humour is often used, consequently followed by laughter in the audience.

The third category is:

Common structures, ideas and models

As described above, keeping to joint agreements and creating common structures is vital in opera improvisation and lyrical improvisation, for example, by maintaining a specific musical style. This may be exemplified by Gregor's work with keeping the musical context in the alternative ending of the Tosca/Scarpia scene in Puccini's opera at Vadstena Gamla Teater (Video example 24, and in Wilén, 2015), or in the use of recurring musical themes and motifs as mentioned above. The improvisers remind each other to keep previous agreements and information given earlier in the performance by addressing them vocally, instrumentally⁹⁴ or in movement,⁹⁵ presenting ideas that keep previous information given in a scene in focus for development. One clear example is how Mette - in the role as the woman who longs

⁹³ Video example 29: I am scene, *The schools*. <https://youtu.be/D1Vtz9A7RK4>

⁹⁴ Video example 22. Sara starts the scene singing "I am" as a reminder to Samuel as presenter about the agreed technique at 1:17. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfFKSGWnOwA>

Video example 2: The percussionist Lars starts playing the triangle as sign of the king's triumph at 01:56, keeping to the previous agreement. <https://youtu.be/WsYu8HA3EqE>

⁹⁵ Video example 3: Linus takes Sara's hand and reintroduces movement of dropping a glass, and together they expand it to throwing a glass deliberately at 6:13. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvNIDLFO1Vs&feature=youtu.be>

for a child – looks for ways to convince her lover in the aria of GoL I (Video example 8).⁹⁶

The analysis of the improvisations by Impromans show how we use themes that recur, for instance, the dramatic exclamation in *Walpurgisnacht* (Video example 4) as noted in *Expectations and contrasts* above. This is also the case in Video example 5 from *Vernissage*, above, when the singers start with the first theme again at exactly the same time, after about two minutes of improvisation.

Power relations are coded with green:

Power relations

As noted in the part about the red category, ‘Expectations and contrast’ above, singers can use physical and vocal contrast as a means to give and take power as characters in the opera drama.

In the scene *An elk!* above (Video examples 16, 17) the status relations between the boss Desideria and the woodsman Lars form the core of the dynamics in the scene.

The very beginning of the scene, *Carry my throne* (Video example 7) from SM, sets the power relations between the queen and Miss Krappelstein in focus, when Sara asks Linus to carry the throne. Since Linus has barely left the stage, it takes some seconds for him to change role, which Sara (as the queen) notices, and uses in terms of acting as very impatient. The status play continues during the scene in an almost stylised manner, inspired by the *commedia dell'arte* characters of master and servant.

The analyses of material from the project, *Gravity of Life*, show that the concept and methods of the project affected the interactions of the singers and the pianist in a striking way. Many scenes were longer, especially the final scenes from the performances from GoL I, II and IV (Video example 8, 9 and 23). Both singers and pianist worked with investigating the relations of the characters in a slower pace than before, presenting fewer ideas for the ongoing narrative, and instead taking time to develop the dynamics of interaction by other means. The most significant example shows how the singers use power negotiations to create a dynamic relation between the characters. As noted above, in the final scene of GoL II (Video example 23), there are several examples in the scene where the improvisers enact an argument between a married couple.

⁹⁶ Mette at 03:56 (‘I have to convince Ahmed!’) <https://youtu.be/zwZ-cgQKOUw>

V. Performative tropes

The results from the interview study and the IAM analysis clearly show that we use conceptualizations of music, body and voice that emanate from our experiences of work with classical repertoire performance, both in opera and lyrical improvisation. We create characters and expressions in singing and movement, as vocal, physical and musical actions. This is also evident in the pianists' work. These tropes can be actions and patterns of actions, strategies, techniques or even approaches in a scene. This is not surprising, since we are trained to use the instrument in a certain way, as well as our bodies in the staged action. The repertoire has shaped the way we act on stage, even if there is no script. As noted by Alexandra in the interview study (Wilén, 2015, n.p.), a use of tropes in opera improvisation can be related to the contrasting energies between singing opera and speaking. It differs in the use of energy, as the opera voice calls for a much higher level of intensity on stage. The discrepancy between a realistic acting technique and the instrumental use of the voice in opera opens up for play, in terms of twisting or turning in the performance. This can be compared to Englund's (2017) notion of a hyperbole as trope in operatic performance (see above).

The constant negotiations between the performers open up for turns into other situational layers. Singers also take the chance to consciously add intertextual layers or give interperformative associations in their actions. These appear as comments on the interactional situation at hand or as relating to other cultural sources in text, music or movement.

In conclusion, I have found the concept of trope to be useful in the description of interactional processes. Following the IAM study above, we may use these tropes in a number of functions where the need for contrast is evident. As Alexandra remarked in the interview, playing with a trope is efficient for an ensemble, since it carries so much information in advance. In his stimulated recall session, Gregor recognised certain musical patterns and figures in his playing, but at the same time perceived that we use them so swiftly in performance that they are almost subconscious.

Deconstruction of performative bodies and voices

In the project, *Opera Nova* (ON), the ensemble worked with finding means for deconstructing the ways they perceived themselves as singers. The goal was also to find new ways for agency and role-taking on stage, in the change of roles and trying

out new singer positions. A recurring discussion in the project was whether the singers should aim to impersonate the ‘other’ gender of a character, or if the character should adapt to the singer. Below, I give three examples of how the ensemble worked. One vital method in this process of deconstruction was to try on, and play with, the performative tropes of the opera singer stereotypes.

...in improvised scenes

In this improvised scene (Video example 30), the singers and the pianist use parody to deconstruct their own images of the stereotype roles they are assigned with by the voice *Fach* system. It is also a way of deconstructing gendered roles in operatic performance. The ‘ritual’ starts with the pianist, who makes an exaggerated romantic piano improvisation, then suddenly stopping it and taking off his jacket.⁹⁷ Then the singers, one by one, create scenes inspired by Western classical voice stereotypes such as the tired Russian bass, the heroic tenor, the merry and jolly Mozart baritone, the crazy laughing modernist coloratura soprano and the suffering lyrical soprano.

Video example 30: *Death of the Tropes*

<https://youtu.be/R8-0z25INE>

...in repertoire scenes

The main artistic focus of the work in ON was to find ways of problematizing operatic performance through a norm critical perspective on vocal actions in relation to the scores as text, as well as performative conventions in character interpretation. A deconstruction of the relation between the character as sign and the performer as signifier took place by means of ‘realistic’ acting, in scenic improvisation in the first part of a repertoire scene seen in Video example 31, the Tosca/Scarpia scene (Puccini). We performed the dramatic situation without with a realistic reading without any ironic distance, and changed roles in the scene with the help of a tagging-out technique. This is further described in Wilén, 2013b.

Video example 31: *Tosca and Scarpia, tag-out technique*

<https://youtu.be/o9rtMRYdFeU>

In Wilén (2015), some of the improvisers discuss the scene between Tosca (Samuel) and Scarpia (Sara), and discovered that they perceived the role of the character so strongly that it did not matter what gender the performer had.

⁹⁷ The solo piano part is omitted in Video example 30, but is to be found in the digital archive on the homepage.

Another example where we improvised the scenic movements in repertoire scenes is taken from the seduction scene between Zerlina and Don Giovanni (Mozart). This was played in four short sequences, or takes.

In Video example 32, two singers performed a part of the duet as Don Giovanni (a man) and Zerlina (a woman). The staging was decided on beforehand - not live improvised - while the different functions as voices of bodies of the characters varied in each performance. After a while there was a blackout and the scene restarted.

In the second version, the singers on stage still act in the same roles, whereas two singers in the back sing: a woman sings Don Giovanni and a man sings Zerlina.

In take three of the scene, the physical roles are switched between the male and female singer on stage, so that the woman performs the body of Don Giovanni and the man the body of Zerlina, while the singers backstage sing the opposite.

In the final version, the woman on stage performs the body and voice of Don Giovanni, and the man performs Zerlina.

Video example 32: Deconstructing voices and bodies of Zerlina and Don Giovanni

<https://youtu.be/wiNqziGRhDg>

As seen in these examples,⁹⁸ the performative tropes are used in order to problematise intertextual and interperformative relations in operative performance, by 'repeating with difference', to allude to Hutcheon's description of the use of parody in Stravinsky's music (2000, p. 65). This method of norm critical operatic performance was developed as a result of the collaboration work between Oi and opera director Elisabet Ljungar in the spring of 2012.

Musical tropes

Below follows some examples and descriptions of how musical tropes are used, from *Operaimprovisatörerna* and *Impromans*.

Operaimprovisatörerna

The solo scenes in the *Death of the Trope* above (Video example 30) show a variety of musical tropes in terms of musical styles that become a bit twisted and exaggerated by the singers' and pianists' approaches, phrasing and dynamics, with parody as a result. Gregor describes the parodic approach as a heightened level of

⁹⁸ More examples from ON are to be found in Wilén (2014).

energy in the performance approach. At the same time both he and Alexandra notes that this heightened level of instrumental energy is one of the requirements for performing opera as compared to spoken theatre, or other music drama formats.

In many public performances, OI constantly plays with intertextual and interperformative elements, such as the vocal phrasing, the character portrayal, the focus of the narrative and, of course, the musical style. A common strategy is to focus on the expectations on operatic performance in relation to events in everyday life. Video example 33 is a bricolage of scenes from the performance concepts *Mozart in Town*, *Moments of Opera*, and *Pure and simple opera*.⁹⁹ In *Mozart in Town*, the first act consists of a number of scenes. One of these is commonly a scene where Gregor interviews a member of the audience about their morning on a regular day: what they do, who they meet and so on. The audience member then gets to choose one of the singers to perform as him or her, after which the singers perform the morning as a short scene in form of spoken theatre. The next step is to ask the audience for two classical or contemporary musical styles, or composers. This usually renders many suggestions (such as Wagner, Puccini, Bizet, Britten or baroque), and the improvisers make their choices of two. They then make two versions of the morning scene, based on these styles. In these variations, the narrative and the vocal lines are somewhat altered in relation to which composer or style is used.

Video example 33: Bricolage musical tropes

<https://youtu.be/DkbwqoWtUVo>

Distinctive musical styles are often used in performance games (techniques for a scene) such as ABC-scene¹⁰⁰ and the collage, which is described in example 2 (Video example 3, Table 2) in the section on artistic methods above. Video example 34 is an example of an ABC-scene from a performance of *Mozart in Ystad* 2011.

Video example 34: ABC-scene

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5pA7oNIALY&feature=youtu.be>

Gregor's use of recitative styles in example 2 (Video example 2) in the artistic methods section (the scene with the herd boy and the queen) gives some clear examples of his work with musical tropes, where he depicts the emotional states of

⁹⁹ The bricolage consists of scenes from *Moments of opera* (*Ögonblick av Opera*, my translation) 2010, *Pure and simple opera* (*Rena Rama Operan*, my translation) 2011, *Mozart in Town* (*Mozart i stan*, my translation) 2009, 2011 and 2015.

¹⁰⁰ A scene where the singers must start each new vocal line by strictly following the Swedish alphabet.

the singers' actions in a tonality inspired by Mozart. The most evident example is when Sara as the queen mentions the danger for the aspiring king to be thrown into the underworld. Meanwhile, Gregor plays a dramatic escalation through the low registers, eventually landing on a low F. When the new king is accepted, Gregor turns the melody upwards, eventually landing on a dominant chord (relating to the following orchestral part).

Impromans

In a stimulated recall session after the performance from Skissernas Museum (*My love*, Video example 26), Conny described how the painting chosen by one audience member as vantage point for the improvisation, a sketch from the Vence du Chapel de Rosaire (The Rosenchapel) by Matisse, immediately made him think of the Puccini opera, *Suor Angelica*. This inspired him to depict the atmosphere of this opera in his playing, rather than connecting to specific musical material. One of the audience members gave us the words, 'the beginning of a peace process', which gave me an association to the moment of silence in the middle of a quarrel.

Although I was not aware of Conny's source of inspiration during performance, in our analysis we noted that his tonal language and phrasing inspired me to use the voice with a timbre and phrasing that lies very close to the operatic Puccini tradition. Conny uses an orchestral approach, with coloured chords in a rhythmic quarter-note pattern, which to me lies close to the orchestral imitation of the church bells in Puccini's *Tosca* (even though this was not Conny's intention). The vocal action I chose was to beg someone to come to reason, and this dramatic situation ended up as resembling soprano aria situations, and character subject positions in romantic/veristic vocal repertoire.

In the work with *Impromans*, we often find ourselves using a tonal language of the early to mid-20th century, with potential for strong expressivity, as in *Walpurgis fire* (Video example 4). This could be considered as a common framing or a musical style trope often used in our improvisations, although it is not decided in advance. We often relate to inner images, although these are not necessarily the same. Instead, we share conceptualizations of the style and negotiate through our musical intentions, the 'how' we interact. In this example, it is Conny's first upbeat phrase that gives me the suggestion of a tonal language. Meanwhile, Conny's choice of musical character in the start was inspired by my facial expression. This in turn emanated from how I experienced the inner image situation (that Conny did not know of) and the harsh smoke from the *Walpurgis fire*.

This is part of a dramatic impromans performed in a concert at Malmö Academy of Music in 2014 (Video example 35). It emanated out of the suggestion from an audience member to make an improvisation inspired by French Impressionism. As I could not quite relate to the first piano part, I chose to wait and establish a dramatic scene through physical movement. I sang one phrase in Swedish, and suddenly one chord inspired me to switch to French (and later English). To me, it was if the song changed very suddenly, and we started phrasing together. When watching the video example, I notice that it is not only musical phrasing, but the movements of the body that are synchronised with the musical periods, as if the style gave us a joint set of phrasing in our respective instruments. The subject for the improvisation was the word 'old lady', and this made me associate to an elderly woman who longed to make contact with her child with the help of a new computer, but does not dare to try, because she does not know how. The French art song flourished around the beginning of the 20st century, and in this song I worked with the discrepancy between the classical style and a contemporary theme, which gives an intertextual layer that could convey humour. However, my aim was to express feelings of longing that are so closely connected to this style, where no humour is involved. Since words are central to the audience's ability to connect to the performance, I felt the need to switch into English after a while.¹⁰¹

Video example 35: *They Tell Me*

<https://youtu.be/tpYSX6qczQ8>

In the interview study, one of the singers comments on the common musical culture and how it can manifest itself in a cadenza at the end of an aria, where s/he intuitively knows how the piano ending of the piece will be, and how long it is until the change of scenes.

Character and status tropes

Analyses of ten longer Oi performances show that the singers take on roles that have dramaturgical functions in relation to each other, creating a gallery of contrasting role tropes that complement each other in forming the dramaturgical structure. The same functions occur, even though each character is unique. This construction is similar to much storytelling in Western contexts. I see a clear relation between opera improvisation and the descriptions of how the genre *opera buffa* developed from a Neapolitan folk tradition where improvisation was a vital part and the

¹⁰¹ Video examples 2 and 29 also show how other languages such as German and Italian can be used as means in the intertextual and interperformative play.

communicative aspects and wit of the performers stood in focus, rather than the performed material. In the development of *opera buffa* into composition, composers took advantage of the close relations between music and action in the improvised performances. This is central in opera, and much of the qualities of interaction have gotten lost in the opera field today.

There is sometimes more than one main character in the improvised operas. These are at the centre of attention, appear in many scenes, and their background and reactions to what occurs become the core of the mythos, the emergent story. The main characters usually have a more passive role when it comes to driving the mythos forward, and there are often one or more supporting actors who takes on the responsibility to create circumstances around the main character for them to react to. In order to put pressure on the action, it is very common that one of the supporting characters take on a role with much power, such as a superior employer. Another type of role (when these do not concur) is the physical character-supporting role. Apart from this, the improvisers can also take on a narrating part, telling the audience and the colleagues what happens, not in character, but as improvisers. There are also minor roles, which may appear briefly, for instance, in order to establish a milieu or traits of the main character.

In order to examine how we as classical singers have distributed the parts between us, I have analysed which roles men and women have played in the ten performances. The roles were evenly distributed, also the power roles, with only two exceptions. The main character roles were in majority performed by women, and the physical character roles by men.

One way of using and playing with character tropes is to play a recurring status relation, for instance the boss and the underling. In the interview study this is described by two of the performers. They both enjoy this and are aware of when it occurs. They also describe how they alternate between the dominant and the subordinate person between performances, but they have never talked about it behind the stage, nor decided it in advance. This technique has roots in *commedia dell'arte* and is referred to as central in modern theatre improvisation by Johnstone (1985). This 'power play' gives the improvisers possibilities to investigate the relation on stage, and how their characters can interact within these status positions, when facing unexpected problems during the emergent situations. They both note that the roles in these positions may change between the improvisers in different performances.

We've had this thing, that we become these two characters... Here I am boss, and X is my underling. But on another occasion I am H's lapdog, and that's what's funny... We often get into these Laurel and Hardy situations, me and H. And it's very funny, so I think that we both reach for these occasions.

H describes how this also has technical implications for the contents of the scene:

And then I think this is a good technique because, if X doesn't know what to do, or doesn't come up with an idea, as a main character in this scene... then it's up to me. We haven't talked about this but I think that instead of someone coming in from the outside and adding things, we should make something up, that's why I'm a side kick. I am supposed to be there to help her/him to find solutions to the problems, because that's how it often works.

The two examples from LM (Video examples 16, 17) noted in the status category above are clear examples of how the singers play status tropes, alluding the master-servant theme, especially since they are played in a musical style of atonal music that reminds one of early 20th century German opera. The collage, 'Glas', (Video example 3) is perhaps too obvious as example, since it is based on a game where movement and musical elements are repeated, with techniques of the misuse of power as theme.

Humour

I stand in the middle of the stage and quickly glance into my hand. Lotta's hands bounce over the keyboard and land, while spreading a seventh chord like a fan. I look onwards, upwards in the air, to the right. I see... a white multistorey house. 'What a fancy house...' I respond to the image. Mette walks straight across the stage and stops, close to the audience. The audience laughs. Lotta mirrors my melody phrase and then rolls into a light ragtime. I am bewildered, blank in my head. What is she doing now? We have never done anything similar to jazz before. I look down and suddenly see an imaginary stain on my blouse. I wet my finger and start trying to rub it off. And I just go along with the finger's movements as I feel how my feet start to lift from the floor, in pace with Lotta's left hand. Now I know: I have toothpaste on my sweater. That's why I can't go into the house; I have to try to take it off. Voices jump towards me, laughing. Mette moves. She's a dancer.

I look over the audience and I feel how I join the bounciness of the music, I became mine now. 'As in.. doing...', I have no idea what to say. My head is blank. So I elevate a bit from the floor and dance along. I pretend that I can dance too. I think that I have clean, straight jazz ballet movements. From the movement there should come some words, it's supposed to be words. Nothing. Voices laugh at me. No, I cannot dance particularly well. Now I know, things at the bank. Balls of laughter roll in across the stage. I always choose something that scares me, authorities, to make an error. A loan? No, right. I hear a confirming laughter from a friend in the

audience who recognises her own story. It was my choice, I borrowed some and I get a warm and scratchy laughter back. I heard, and it's alright, the laughter says.

Now I know who this character is (it's not my friend!). This is me, the lonely, tired mother, who always looks a bit worn out and crumbly, with electric hair and tiny blood vessels in her cheeks, cold yellow fingers. Who stands in the gap between what should be and what sadly enough will never be, who never gets anywhere, because silly little things always get in between. She thinks, she could easily overcome them but it's so clear to everyone else that there is a gulf between her and what she's thinking of doing. I have found a gap between what she wants to happen and what's in the way, and I roll down, layer by layer, toothpaste on my sweater. I feel them through my stomach, and I move with an imaginary musical body, and I know that I boggle, barefoot, plump, rounded, and I still want her to claim space. No, it's me who claims the space. I take time and space and try, I take it on and try here, in my burlesque, roaring ignorance. I think you know that I can't do this, but I do it anyway, and feel quite good, quite imperfect. The key is a bit high for me in jazz, I just float along on the harmonies and try to get pressure in the voice, phrasing against the steady pace of the piano. I overdrive the voice and she quarrels with God. Then I nail a tone by gliding up, and then turn down into the chest voice. Now the voice gave in, the cold won't let it be tight, I have to glide around, hardly in key. The rounds get smaller and smaller. Then the end comes, and I pull in with Lotta's loops. I stand on my knees and enjoy lifting my arm up in the air. I lift my head up against the ceiling, and it starts to rain! The stage roof opens and the drops wash away the stain.

The scene I describe is situated in the middle of an improvised opera, performed by Operaimprovisatörerna, at Boulevardteatern, in Stockholm a few years ago. When I entered the stage floor I had an image of the fictive situation, who I was and where I was going. But I was unprepared for the genre picked by the pianist, and fell out, into the singer's subject position. My head turned blank and I felt unsafe, both as body and voice on stage, surrounded by the jazzy tune. There was a gap between my expectations on the situation, what I intended to say, and the musical situation chosen by the pianist. I decided to dare to wait, and to try to turn, and portray this moment of insufficiency. The long moment of being blank, not knowing what to do. Then the idea about the bank came, and I chose it. When I sang I did not know if this was a good choice, or if my friend would feel concerned. The moment when I did not know appeared shortly afterwards. But in that moment I experienced several layers of choice at once, and searched to know whether I had gone too far. Then the approving laughter came from my friend. Situations of humour occur during performances, where the audience laughs. What happens when something is fun, and what function does the laughter have?

The discrepancies in opera as genre, with the expectations and the audience's pre-understanding, compared to everyday events and situations less common in opera traditions, create contrast: the situation becomes unreasonable. From there it is not far for laughter to occur, as a relief from the unexpected suspension. But laughter also has an approaching function, as a marker that individuals make a transition in their relation, as noted by Warner-Garcia (2014). In contrast to the example from the birdhouse at the very beginning of this text, in Oi, the laughter is never intended to be excluding. This may relate to the fact that all improvisers take risks together in performance, and need to be in close dialogue. On stage there is no space for internal jokes where some improvisers are excluded.

It is impossible to know whether members of the audience perceive humour and laughter in the performances as inclusive or not. My experience is that when high and open laughter occurs in an audience during performance, it is a sign that the performers and the audience share references and come closer to each other.

Sometimes we work consciously with intertextual, interperformative or parodic techniques. This connects to Butler's thoughts on the performative as a playground for discourse. It can be in naturalised categories such as the identity of a character in realistic acting. We use certain ways of moving, and our use of this bodily language may seem as a stable identity. But if the repetition is broken, this stable identity appears as a weak construction. This can be applied also in the role of the classical singer. When the singer makes a turn (category 2 in the IAM model above) and reaches out from the realistic interaction on stage, out to the audience for a dialogue about the content of what to do on stage, an unexpected situation occurs. Through this discrepancy, expectations of an operatic performance are turned upside down and something else becomes possible. This relates to how Bakhtin (2007) perceived dialogue as central, between humans as well as between systems and humans, and laughter as an eruptive or even subverting function, when shared by all individuals within a situation. This is noticeable in the bricolage of musical tropes (Video example 30) above.

When I look back on this scene, I see that I on the one hand (unconsciously) parodied an improvised musical tune, but on the other time took the situation seriously. I was inspired by my friend in the audience and acted spontaneously. When I made the connection to the loan on the bank I knew that no one except for my friend would understand who I was thinking of. When I realised this, I wanted to acknowledge my friend, by showing that I see what difficulties s/he has to face, and give credit to the fact that s/he chooses to laugh about them, together with others. In that second I wanted to try to embody that uncertainty, claiming space

with my insufficient body, and to be happy about it. As noted in the interviews, humour is also used as a mode of 'keeping' safe for a performer. In that case, the performer starts to act with distance to the situation at hand, often by making a turn into a rhetorical layer of the situation, addressing the audience directly, or by not taking the offer given from the fellow improviser seriously. In those cases, the humour has not got the including function, since the careful improviser distances her/himself from the dramatic space, and thereby also to the other improvisers as a group. This differs from when the improviser puts her/himself on the line by taking a risk. Wickström (2005) argues that the audience wants to think that what happens on stage has to do with them. He notes the importance of approaching the audience in the performance space directly, to create a sense of group identity. I experienced that my friend and big parts of the audience met me, and I interpret their laughter as an approval of what I did. Our communication broke the fourth wall, as I communicated on many levels: me as the mother, as improviser and as friend.

I speak to a colleague about humour and opera improvisation. In a good scene, s/he claims that humour and gravity constantly whirl around each other. It's vital that the humour has a sense of gravity, in order to make a scene more layered. There is something anti-hierarchical and uncontrolled in a real laughter. Even a smile makes you - as spectator - open up to what happens. In this way, humour can create a bridge for the serious communication between the spectator and the performer. Since humour is a rhetorical trope with intertextual and interperformative dimensions, it is perhaps no surprise that humour so often occurs in opera and lyrical improvisation performance situations, used to address and include the audience socially, as well as addressing and playfully subverting hierarchical norms of classical vocal performance.

Conclusions

A performative kaleidoscope: a summary of the project

The main purpose with this research project has been to investigate the potential of CCVI as a critical and creative tool, and a site for development and research in classical vocal performance. The artistic research methods have been centred around three fundamental approaches:

1. Investigating, articulating and communicating aspects of CCVI processes
2. Using theoretical concepts such as performativity, interperformativity, action and tropes as investigative tools
3. Challenging and problematizing practices and norms in classical vocal performance through CCVI work.

The main objective has been to find ways to approach audiences and collaborate with agents in the stage performance field by means of CCVI as the artistic method, rather than to create musical works. The investigations of interactional processes in dialogue with theoretical concepts have resulted in the development of analytical models, concepts and modes of documentation.

Performativity constitutes an over-arching analytical perspective in this thesis, and is applied in three dimensions¹⁰²: ‘the symbolic (intertextual/interperformative), the structural (transgressing situations and positions), and the individual (body hexis)’ (Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a, p. 7). Here, also the concepts of intertextuality, interperformativity and deconstruction are employed (Wilén, 2013a, Wilén, 2013b).

Central examples are drawn from: (i) the deconstruction of gender norms and power relations, and (ii) the interaction with other musical actors.

¹⁰² These dimensions are not complementary, but often appear as overlaid.

According to Frisk & Östersjö (2013) a vital aspect of artistic research validity is the use of methods that allow for multi-layered subject positioning in the research processes:

Validity then is fundamentally a matter of making the subjectivity of the artist visible in the research design. The need for creating a multi-layered understanding of subject-positions comea out clearly in the study of collaborative creativity, out of which, research into contemporary performance practices is but one important field (Frisk & Östersjö, 2013, p. 59).

In order to articulate and problematise subject positions in vocal classical performance as layered performative situations, I have used the concept of framing (Goffman, 1974) for analysis in artistic contexts such as labs and performances, writings and video analyses. This generates tools for exploring concepts such as subject position, persona and performative space, in relation to interaction and creative agency in CCVI performance. The concepts of action and situation (used in stage acting and well known as working tools among the CCVI practitioners) have proven useful in my analysis of the artistic processes that underlie the documented improvisations. To me, this interdisciplinary approach indicates that the perspectives and methods applied in this project can play a role in dialogues with other artistic, scholarly and pedagogical research practices.

As a result of the methodological and analytical investigations, three procedures for the analysis of CCVI interactions have been developed:

The first one, action analysis in improvisation, is the result of applying a method of role interpretation from theatre on an improvised scene. This pointed to a need for a model where musical actions could be taken into account as vital parts of the emergent interactions. In turn, this called for a way of integrating the partaking improvisers' perspectives in the analyses of the documentation.

The second one, the interview study, articulated experiences and perspectives of the improvisers in stimulated recall sessions. This study showed that: i) presence, ii) relations to each other and the emerging material, and iii) the creation of common agreements and structures are considered as central aspects of the interaction.

The third one, the Interplay Analysis Model, emerged as a result of the analytical application of the three categories on the video documentation. In this way, IAM made it possible to analyse vocal, musical and physical actions in the layered CCVI situations, or spaces. Later a fourth category, status negotiation, was added. By means of video analyses and investigative work in the artistic projects, I searched for

a concept that could describe the use of recognizable acting and musical patterns¹⁰³ in the creation of music, text and dramatic content. For this, I suggest the term *musical and performative tropes*. Improvisers engaged in CCVI intuitively and consciously use musical and performative tropes in an intertextual and interperformative play with the performance context and tradition.

CCVI in action: a play with musical and performative tropes

In this section, I discuss the results and implications of using the concept of action as an analytical point of departure when researching the interactional aspects of CCVI.

Action, tropes and flow

The articulation of interacting layers of action in CCVI performances that I have made in this project have shed light on the performative potential of a vocal actor's possibility to approach the relation between her/himself as a person, a vocal and instrumental persona and a rhetorician (the latter in direct dialogue with the audience). Here, Rynell's understanding of action as 'carried out by fictive dramatis personae' (2008, p. 25) can be compared to how CCVI singers in opera and lyrical improvisation use fictive personae as characters on mythos and praxis levels, as well as on musical and rhetorical levels. In this interface lies the performative space, which in CCVI is more open for individual artistic choices than is often the case in classical repertoire performance.

Even though there are clear connections to how the improvisers in *Oi* and *Impromans* make deliberate choices, the outcomes of the interview study indicate that social, intuitive dimensions of the actions, such as engaging in the present, making turns into other keyings of situations (for instance by the use of humour) are also vital in CCVI. The most central, as described by the interviewees, is to maintain a joint focus on the present moment, dealing with the energies and to remain receptive while actively listening to each other. This can be seen as understanding others through embodied yet unarticulated, 'unanalysed' actions. In

¹⁰³ In Wilén, 2015, the Swedish word *schablon* was used in a discussion of how gender was enacted on stage, unsuccessfully translated to cliché (n.p.).

other words, the improvisers conduct both deliberate, chosen actions and respond intuitively to each other.

There are many examples of how the improvisers in *Oi* and *Impromans* intuitively and consciously use musical tropes, in the form of musical styles, patterns or themes. The musical development in the improvisations are usually based on significant motifs and melody-based parts connecting to the musical style at hand. They often ignite the dramatic development. Although these choices are not always made consciously, they become a meeting point where both opera improvisers and lyrical improvisers act inside a known discourse in music (Folkestad, 2017) that gives common frames for the improvisation, also in relation to the audience. The trope becomes a mode of approaching a situation through a set of musico-performative actions built on previous understandings and experiences; in the groups, in the improviser's perception of the context, and in the audience. This can be compared to how Lord (2003) describes formula and theme as building stones within a narrative frame in the oral epic practice, which matches Pressing's (1987) outline of improvisation as skill, and Rosenberg's (in press) description of folk songs as cognitive frames. Relating the concept of cognitive framing to the use of musico-performative tropes here is also motivated by the definition of a trope as naturalised patterns of expression and conception in cognitive science (O'Brien, 2014).

As seen in the chapter, *Dialogues*, the improvisers often communicate through a shared flow of embodying inner images through movement, words and sound, where it is of less importance if these are shared as a joint understanding of (semiotic and experiential) meaning between singers and instrumentalist. Instead, these groups meet in the dynamic musical space. The stimulated recall sessions with Gregor and Conny indicated that they see the intuitive use of themes or musical patterns, in combination with a constant dialogue with the ongoing vocal performance actions, as a vital part of the improvising pianist's practice. It is through these channels that the communication between singer and pianist is established in the emergent music. In the session from the orchestral improvisation scene (*How does it sound when you chop a tree?*), Eric notes a similar experience. Eric describes how he usually works with embodying inner sonic images that he perceives from the score. In this scene, he went for a more illustrative approach, enacting concrete images in a mere mimetic way, as a vocal and musical persona, in a rhetorical and musical space together with the orchestra. Both the conductor and the singers note that even though the musicians and the singers did not share the same images of the ongoing process in this scene, they interacted and experienced a high degree of joint timing, nailing it at the ending, to connect to Eric's words. The comments in Video example 19 (*Bank*) point to a similar communication on a musical (pragmatic) level,

where the dynamic intentions of the musical actions create a common space. Sara and Conny interact in the musical space, with images that often differ. Still, in the musical, dynamic intentions that emanate as a result of their relations to the images and each other's musical offers, they work in a joint direction.

Though constantly present, the strategies for choosing certain musical tropes have seldom been discussed in detail in rehearsals, jams or performances for as long as we have worked together in *Oi* and *Impromans*. It is as though the ideas and intentions that we wish to act out are in constant focus, whereas the formulae and tropes are more seldom common, articulated patterns and structures in rehearsals. In fact, after a performance they are hardly even remembered by the improvisers, who instead reflect on their experiences of the (performative) method of communication, as in a conversation. This working method correlates with Potter's (1998) notion of musical rehearsals in genres that are in a stage of development. Instead of focusing on defining musico-dramatic prototypes that can be reproduced (as is often the case with framings of opera characters as types in vocal classical repertoire production), the CCVI performers focus on investigating possibilities, prerequisites and not the least framings (Goffman, 1974) for their interactions in performance. The interview study points to how an optimal mode occurs when the improvisers are so focused on the interactional flow 'in the now' that it is difficult to distinguish who is actually giving the impulses in the emerging scene. Maintaining an interactive flow in the moment is considered prior to the specific choices of musical, textual and dramatic actions. This is similar to the approach used in modern improvisation theatre described by Vilc (2015).

Musical troping as a communicative tool in CCVI

Seen from a musical perspective, the intuitive use of musico-performative tropes has both positive and negative implications. On the positive side, the silent agreements of keeping the musical material out of discussion during performance helps the classically trained performers to maintain their identities as improvisers, without risking to dip into the holes of musical self-criticism in terms of an inner, evaluating guide (Johansson, 2008), that form part of almost every classical performer's luggage, sedimented during years of learning experiences in the conservatory system. It is also a way to create spontaneous joint structures and agreements from within the improvisational scenes, without discussing it 'off stage' first. One of the singers in the interview study notes that the similarities between operatic characters and 'the old geezers' are many and hard to separate. In his interpretation, the difference concerns the level of embodiment of the performer, that is, the performer's level of

presence in the situation. Another improviser speaks about the temptation to take on the role assigned to you by the audience, and about their expectations. To me, this is not coincidental. The intuitive use of musical and performative tropes in CCVI stems from a need to (re)create common frameworks and sign systems, and to give confirmation to each other within the situation. In this respect, CCVI is similar to other musical improvisation traditions such as jazz, baroque music and liturgical organ improvisation, or oral traditions where the vantage point is formulas or ideas that the performer learns in order to vary. In the classical field, this way of approaching music has disappeared and given way to the instrumental-technical approach (Hultberg, 2000), where a musician is primarily evaluated in terms of technical mastery.

On the negative side, a constant focus on the improvisers' experiences, internal communication and audience contact may leave little space for the development of distanced, analytical tools through which a higher complexity in the emergent materials can be achieved. An unexpected outcome of the stimulated recall sessions was that the improvisers had a joint experience of the improvisations from 'the outer eye and ear', mediated through the recording as a transitional frame. This sparked discussions of and reflections on performative aspects that otherwise seldom form part of the CCVI work. My conclusion is that this method, along with the models for action analysis, IAM and the concept performative trope have created new tools for investigating and articulating notions of CCVI. This formulates be seen as a response to my first research question.

Lately, *Oi* has begun to address the development of the ensemble's musical interactions. This has resulted in projects focusing on the dialogue with classical and contemporary vocal repertoire, such as ON, LM and GoL. One of the key experiences from this work is that, when approaching a composed musical format or material, we need to slow down the improvisational interaction. Our musico-dramatic tempo is higher than the music 'allows' in most of the repertoire we have met. Consequently, entering into the music structure of composed classical music has challenged the musical comfort zones of the improvisers. However, it is my intention to continue this development through collaboration with musical improvisers, composers and music arrangers.

The artistic collaboration with the composer Ulrika Emanuelsson in *Gravity of Life IV* is an example of this. In her work, she creates music as conceptualizations of images and movement. My analysis of the final improvised scene of the performance in Hjørtshagen 161204 showed that, for the first time since *Oi's* start, Gregor used a new strategy: he chose to stick to one rhythmical theme during almost the entire

scene of ten minutes, thereby 'forcing' the singers (and himself) to remain in the same, slowly developing dramatic situation, with repeated sustained chords in the low register. In the GoL performance, the interplay is mostly open, without given answers, and no predetermined mythos ending delivered by all. I remember how I, during this final scene, felt vulnerable and exposed to the situation. It was not possible to escape by taking on a role that drives the course of events further. I was 'stuck' in the praxis, in the middle of a web of relations that made the air almost hard to breathe, as if we now would dare to wait for the unknown, relating not to the future events, but only to the now. When the other soloists arrived, one by one, we had long or short dialogues, after which followed a quartet where we turned to the audience like in a Mozart opera. We first acted in the same dramatic space, and then all of us turned to an individual dramatic and musical space (as 'a part' in classical opera) in a slow quartet, hereby letting the slow movement have its course until the end.

In *Impromans*, the development has been different from in *Oi*. We have used opera improvisation and humour more and more seldom over the last couple of years. Instead, we focus on interactions in the musical space. This might be due to the fact that I, as the only singer, use more of my inner images in this context than in *Oi*. The inner images do not have to be communicated to anyone outside and are connected to my personal and spontaneous associations and personal experiences. During this period some events of loss have occurred in my personal life, and the impromanses are for this reason now less filled with humouristic aspects. When studying and reflecting on these improvisations, I have strong memories of these personal experiences and the points of departure they created.

The lab performance of *Facets* in November 2015 is one of the few occasions where I have experienced moments of lack of communicative flow and images. This experience was confirmed by Conny in his comments to the lab. As my inspiration and sense of flow declined, I tried consciously to make musical references to Schumanns' *Frauenliebe und Leben*, which formed an intertextual point of departure for the performance. The references were hard to convey to the audience, made up mainly of actors in the field of theatre and experimental music. I strongly remember how Conny and I finally found a way of developing our musical interaction by working with a joint image: the rain. When I sang the word, Conny responded with a flowing theme, filled with energy (heard at the end of Video example 10) which created a transition, as we joined in the musical space.

The experimental setting at the Inter Arts Center included a white tarpaulin that separated the performers from the audience. The lack of communication with the

audience had a negative effect on my improvising experience in the moment. It was as if I made a comment aiming to communicate with the persons in the room that was not heard. One reason for this experience may be that we did not share the same frames of cultural reference. My conclusion is that musical tropes can have a strong communicative and performative function in the contact with the audience and/or other improvisers, as a way of regaining energy as an improviser. Improvising in *Facets*, in my experience, provided an immense contrast to standing in a performance venue that allows for eye contact and shared cultural references with the audience. This indicates that the subject's position as a vocal persona in a classical vocal concert approach renders the singer a sense of identity that is valuable for the classical singer in CCVI, as a performative point of departure. In order for the singer to achieve this subject position, the framing of the performance needs to include this keying. The modern architecture performance venue such as the Inter Arts Center in Malmö offered other keyings and subject positions to the performers and not least to the audience. Combining the strong classical discourse offered by the music of Schumann with the strong modernist discourse and physical position behind the tarpaulin in the *Facet* labs at the venue, I had few possibilities to identify myself as a public performance persona (Frith, 1996) - as a vocal persona impersonating a certain role, or as an agent using the voice as instrumental persona, as in *Vernissage*.¹⁰⁴ This left me with the third of Frith's outlined positions for the singer on stage: the real, physical person, which seems to correlate with the comments from both the performers in the notes from the *Facet* labs above. When we found the 'Rain' theme, we found a way to interact as musical personae. *Facets* can be seen as an experimental work aiming to visualise the subjectivity of the singer (after Frisk & Östersjö, 2013) as a 'critical engagement with a musician's habitus' (Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a, p. 6) in terms of hexis on symbolic, individual and structural levels.

Lord's (2003) a notion that performative qualities are vital to oral (and consequentially, vocal) performance is similar to my claim in this dissertation. Still, it is often complex to find ways for classical performers to search for new musical challenges and new ways of expressing themselves musically. If we can find ways of enriching the music performance arena in the classical field by inviting the oral performance tradition to the table, where the textual tradition has been dining alone for almost two hundred years, and make them talk, the party would be so much more fun. The artistic experiences in this project have provided the possibility to discuss this issue, which I see as positive from an artistic research point of view.

¹⁰⁴ As the performance *Vernissage* indicates, the (instrumental) subject position as agent and a contemporary vocal approach is fully possible in CCVI.

CCVI has been used, and will continue to be used, as a means to challenge and problematise practices and norms in classical vocal performance, both in repertoire and improvisation. This forms a response to my second research question.

Bridging the gap – performative tropes as turns

As one of the interviewees note, the relation between the actions carried out on stage and the performative impressions of the classical singing voice create a gap between the energy level of the classical vocal approach seen from an instrumental perspective, and the dramatic situation at hand. It is a general aspect of opera that has been present since the age of the first operas in Italy during the 17th century, when a system for stylised expressions through vocal and dramatic gesture and phrasing developed (Smart, 2004). It is not a coincidence that repertoire opera mainly deals with existential, highly dramatic and/or mythological themes, so that singers may perform their parts ‘without overtaxing the audience’s suspension or disbelief (Potter, 1998, p. 36) in relation to a realistic setting. This distinguishes operatic vocal performance from the physical approach in theatre acting in a realistic setting, which in Diamond’s (1997) words can be considered as the positivism of mimesis. This discrepancy creates a clash which is often set by the singers ‘charging’ (as noted in the section, *Expectations and contrast*) the situation at hand: ‘It takes something to go in and use the big expression, and we play a little with that’ (ibid.).

In the interview study, some of the singers point to the discrepancy between the operatic voice and everyday life situations, and how it is common in OI’s work to create absurd situations in which singing becomes a bizarre contrast to the actual situation. That is, OI plays with central notions in the performative discourse of classical singing by twisting it a few rounds (in the words of one interviewee). This is partly due to the fact that techniques for audience interaction are inspired by improvisation theatre, where the questions asked to the audience are related to everyday life. In an improvised theatre performance, this can render authentic qualities to a dramatic situation. One of the singers in the interview study noted that the common agreement of a linear dramaturgy often prompts the singers to use their bodies as in realistic acting. However, when transferred to opera, such contributions create a split between the suggestions and the performative and musical techniques of opera as genre, which for better or worse often have a more stylised character.

This discrepancy partly explains the OI improvisers’ interperformative commenting through performance. The (re)creation of tropes around performative aspects of the opera voice and the opera singer as persona can be seen as a way of criticizing the

hegemonic status of classical singing as ideology (Potter, 1998). It is a way of expressing the voltage field between the singer as vocal persona and the singer as physical person, acting in the dramatic and the rhetorical, or social space, at the same time. Classical singers who want to investigate their agency on stage need means for articulating and analysing the discourses that frame the performative situations in order to see which roles or functions they take on in the situation(s). CCVI performers can do this, for example by challenging their professional roles in terms of positions in the performance situation. CCVI as a performative platform is therefore not only a place for artistic work, it is a space for artistic, investigative analysis in order to achieve knowing in action – in practice. The use of improvisation as artistic practice can have effects on symbolic levels, such as how the performers as characters (vocal personae) are perceived by an audience. For performers, a shift of subject position can also give insights on individual levels that over time may instigate change in the performance practices on the structural level of the classical field. The analytical model suggesting the three performative levels is a tool for singers to articulate and problematise their naturalised habits and conscious levels of subject positioning in classical vocal performance, both in improvisation and repertoire.

Humour can be used as a means of turning and deconstructing the frames of situations both on individual, symbolic and structural performative layers. On more than one occasion, a singer (for example me) also chooses to make a comical turn, or a twist by addressing the audience on a rhetorical level, for example, by the use of intertextual associations when using a certain word. As noted in Wilen (manuscript submitted for publication a), humour can also be used by improvisers as a strategy for deflection. With the experiences of SIA taken into account, I think that the reason for intertextual, comical utterances can also be a way to turn away from a possible clash of ideas and expectations among the improvisers by creating a more harmonic social frame. This is in line with how Warner-Garcia (2014) describes humour as a signal of mending relation disagreements through a switch of frames. Rothbart (2007) sees laughter as a sign of a reaction in a safe and playful environment. Even the audience can use this technique, as noted by one of the improvisers in the interview study, with reference to a solo that was intended as serious – about being bullied as a child – which instead was met with laughter.

In dramatic situations where a male character, for instance, is expected to act with aggression and power in line with a ‘canonised’ baritone performative trope, the improviser as a man of today may feel uneasy in relation to the colleague, and ‘escape’ by rekeying the improvisation with a comical turn into another situational context, or frame (Warner Garcia, 2014, p. 164). The reaction can be seen as a way of

commenting on the situation from within the situation, using humour as a tool for accepting that it is hard to fulfil the gendered ideals available for a man or woman in a certain category (Connell & Pearse, 2015, p. 147). Two male improvisers show different experiences of how their attempts to present a softer image of a male character can create complex situations. This can be seen as a turn on a symbolic layer, in the eyes of the audience, and on an individual layer seen from the performer's perspective.

CCVI as a performative platform

In the investigations of relations between performers, musical work and public performance production in the classical field, the projects and labs in this study gather actors from the classical music field: soloists, pianists, audience members, orchestral musicians, producers, music students, conductors, light designers, choir singers, producers, directors, and composers. As noted in Wilén (manuscript submitted for publication a), the projects, LM and GoL, explore collaborations with other significant actors in the field of Western classical music. The symphony orchestra is one of the strongest classical institutions, with rather fixed performance formats deriving from the discourses of interpreting musical works of the Western classical music canon. The conductor of the first production of LM in 2014 (Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a) noted how he, at first, was unsure whether the CCVI actors would manage to create an improvised opera with a consistent narrative. He later described how our collaboration gave him new conceptions of how to create opera by approaching repertoire work with singers and orchestra, with the use of improvisation. This approach also triggered the creativity of the orchestra in new ways. Similar reactions were noted among partakers from the choirs in the work in GoL, especially one of the singers (also in Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a, p. 9):

I came in with one conception (extremely sceptical) and exited with a whole other feeling. I never thought that anyone would make me perform these improvisations, with or without audience, and feel completely comfortable, but there it was!

Furthermore, the work with ON (Wilén, 2013b) opened up for new ways for us as classical singers to conduct norm critical investigations of standard repertoire. Approaching the repertoire through different readings, such as realism, cabaret, abstract movement or parody, functioned as a starting point for scenic and musical

improvisation, explorations and deconstructions of operatic repertoire performance. This project can be seen as a way of deconstructing aspects of gender and power on a symbolic level, but also on an individual level. In the stage conversation held as part of the project ON at Moment:teater in 2012, stereotyped images of gender and power in operatic performance were discussed. One of the improvisers notes how opera improvisation renders possibilities to mock opera as a genre, but preferably 'in a loving way' (as noted in the chapter *Expectations and contrast*). A teacher from the Royal College of Opera noted that the students, rather than the teachers, aimed at traditional ways of acting and being part of a *Fach*. This points to how singers tend to adapt to the values of the institutional opera market (Cotton, 2007; Gvion, 2015; Unander Scharin, 2014), by acting as closely as possible to what they conceive as the expected image of the successful classical singer. In Gvion's radical words, singers are described as being empty of meaning, merely products in a package production industry:

... singing bodies have no particular 'look' and their strength is invisible; their task is to serve as containers in which voice and music are created and from which they are delivered. This process of delivery becomes natural and reflexive, and is a sign of belonging to the community of musicians. (Gvion, 2015, p. 151, writer's quotes)

This gives an image of how the discourses of the classical music market can be described in sociological terms. The similarities with Cone's (1974) notion of the vocal persona embodying a character and his image of the instrumentalist as an agent directing her/his instrument are remarkable. Cone's analytical concept of the vocal and musical personae is used in a number of music research branches, and has a bearing on how classical singers are perceived - thereby also on how they perceive themselves as vocal actors in music. Since the embodying of the vocal persona seems to stick so closely to the classical singer's professional identity, there is certainly a call for further investigations of how singers take on these roles when approaching dramatic performance situations and musical material.

When singers frame their vocal deliverance as active, intentional actions when singing, it gives space for conscious choices in relation to other actors in the performance context at hand, in the audience and in tradition. The kaleidoscopic use of performative tropes in the staged forms of opera and lyrical improvisation suggests that CCVI is a useful artistic tool for performers to achieve a more conscious, critical and distanced relation to the normative use of performative character tropes in the repertoire field, and to the values they carry as voices and bodies in the classical music discourse. In Hutcheon's words, it is 'a form of

repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity' (Hutcheon, 2000, p. xii), leaving space for varying significance and value over time.¹⁰⁵

The performative twisting can also be seen as a useful method for creating rhetorical relations to the audience during performance. This can take place both as a way of framing the performance situation at hand, by twisting the factors of the actual place as performative space and the objective of the classical vocal performance situation, as in *Facets*, *Vernissage* and *Audio Activists*. It can also be a way for the performers to take on different performative approaches and subject positions in a fixed opera performance or concert performance framed setting, as in the opera productions of OI or the Impromans performances (for instance, the salons).

Interperformative play with performative tropes can be a means to articulate how power is constructed as discourse (Butler, 1993) by offering a variety of subject positions and new perspectives to performers on symbolic and individual levels, as well as to spectators on a symbolic level. This is vital if classical singing is to cut its ideological roots as an elite form, a medium used in the 19th century as a site to 'instill bourgeois values as absolute norms' (Potter, 1998, p. 86). Even though it for sure is a long process to change a performer's habitus, the extended working processes that OI has afforded to a number of classical singers can provide ways of denaturalizing and reassigning new relations between signs and what they signify in performance (Diamond, 1997). In this way, singers and instrumentalists use improvisation as a tool to play with and question which cultural codes or socially instituted meanings (Fischer-Lichte, 2008) are assigned to their physical bodies and actions. This can be seen as exploring the vocal operatic approach and the vocal concert approach as sites for critical artistic investigation by the use of theoretical concepts for analysis, which forms a response to my third research question.

An improvisatory approach: challenging the habitus of the classical singer

As outlined and suggested in the material, the vocal operatic approach and vocal concert approach are found to be useful concepts in the analysis of a singer's artistic role in performance. In the three lab performances *Facets*, *Vernissage* and *Audio Activists*, artistic delimitations by transforming the performative space of the

¹⁰⁵ In music, parody is a means used for a practice to comment on itself from within, which has been used by Western composers over time (Hutcheon, 2000, Wilén 2013a).

classical performers in the concert format were explored. In *Facets*, the modern room was divided by a tarp projected with lights, displaying images of the performers in the form of deformed shadows, while cutting off the social (and much of the musical) communication between the performers themselves and with the audience. In *Vernissage*, the singers did not use words or eye contact with the audience as vocal performative tools, which delimited the communicative channels and the words as means to create content and directed the visual attention to the art in the exhibition, by improvising specific pieces to selected works of art by Magdolna Szabó. In *Audio Activists*, electronics were used as a means to separate the voice of the singer from the performative, visual body, by the use of sound effects that were projected from several directions in the room and mixed by an improvising composer. In the labs, art and technology were used as means for deconstruction of the traditional artistic role and core strategies of the classical and contemporary improvising singer in relation to performative aspects of the classical vocal concert approach.

Experiences from the labs have also provided valuable perspectives on the norms of CCVI performance as conducted in OI and Impromans. In *Facets*, the design of the performance space, with a white tarpaulin between performers and audience, shed light on the vital importance of the performance space as a place, or a room for social interaction, in a lyrical concert improvisation approach. Even though the performers were safely placed behind the tarp, they felt more exposed and delimited due to the lack of a situation framed as a social situation. In *Vernissage*, it became clear that a singer's or CCVI 'usual' subject position as vocal persona was not possible to take, since connections between music, words and meaning were not an option. Instead, the performers interacted by role-taking and shifting of functions within the musical space, while visually directing focus on to the paintings. The use of electronics in *Audio Activists* created an extended musical space, which opened up for new musical role-takings and shifts between different vocal personae or the singer. These limitations gave way for new embodied experiences of how we as classical singers and instrumentalists frame ourselves within certain performative contexts. The examples can be seen as exploring aspects of the habitus of the CCVI actor.¹⁰⁶

One central point in this research project concerns how classical singers can find ways to explore, deconstruct and challenge their traditional artistic roles, or habitus, in repertoire performance by creating their own musical material and words in a variety of formats and performative contexts. A critical research stance also includes

¹⁰⁶ As outlined in Wilén (manuscript submitted for publication a) habitus can be described as 'a broad range of embodied patterns that can be applied in rehearsal and performance, containing things to do or not to do, perform or not to perform, show and not show in the moment of artistic action' (Coessens, & Östersjö, 2014, p. 336).

investigating aspects of CCVI as practice, for instance by outlining possible conflicting views on the structures of the work. An agreed frame, or structure, has a uniting function as a common aim, or a cultural entity (Heikinheimo, 2009) in terms of a joint, identified object. One central frame is that the improvisers emphasise the importance of clarity as a key factor when relating to the fellow improvisers. There are two main and contrasting stances for achieving this.

Most of the improvisers in the study identify an overarching goal in obtaining a close contact with the others in order to maintain joint presence, and to be open for others to shape the actions, rather than having one person directing it. As noted above, one improviser gives so much priority to what is happening and is being expressed in the very moment that s/he sometimes forgets where the mythos is going. Presence and openness to the unexpected is mentioned by another improviser:

That is, to listen and to think about the action, but that there is a possibility not to know, and to end up in: what is this? (Wilén, 2015, n.p.).

Another member argues differently. Carefully considered choices of actions, seen from a more distanced perspective of the viewer in relation to the mythos level, are central for achieving a high quality of performance:

So, my thing is that everything we place on stage must have a meaning, or we might as well take it out. And as improvisers we need to learn to take these things in, and take care of them. All the things we say, all the things we do in space work... the offers that are made need to be taken care of. And if we can't take in all the offers today, we need to take them down a bit, so that we can play on the level where we are right now, especially when we go out and perform in front of an audience (Wilén, 2015, n.p.).

In line with this, one improviser states her/his view on the relation to traditional, gendered frames of classical opera performance as vital in CCVI practice even clearer. The comment was made in relation to a video from an improvised opera performance. In this scene, a duet scene between me and the improviser in question, I perceived our acting as quite conventional. When analysing the documentation, I was reminded of how I had experienced 'having to' settle for a very traditional, feeble female approach in my character, in order for the interaction to work. From my perspective, this did not compromise the scene quality from the perspective of the outer eye, since it seemed to reproduce patriarchal performative tropes of power that romantic and veristic opera is so full of already. Still, seen from an interactional perspective, it worked to accept the offered subject position as feeble soprano

character. Then we were interacting on the same level, following a joint (but not agreed on beforehand) frame in our collaboration. In the simulated recall session later, this was confirmed by the other improviser. However, s/he framed this traditional operatic performance approach as a necessary starting point for the performative interaction in OI to develop with a higher degree of quality seen in a longer trajectory:

You play a typical female part, I play a typical male part. We are very founded in them from our experiences as opera singers... Here's what I think. We both know that you play a sort of weaker character, you are not so certain of your cause or your love... and I play... I see a person that is a bit vulnerable and who is on her way to commit suicide in this scene. And that's why I have a little advantage. Then I think that we have advantages as improvisers. Even if we don't play Mozart, 18th century. We recognise the feelings even if we play the present. And that's a foundation that I think we need to find and play with as improvisers, in order to change the structures later.

These two stances represent two out of four IAM categories (*Here and now* and *Sharing and developing framework, structures and ideas above*) and I see this as a vital area for further critical investigation.

This last example brings a vital perspective into the discussion. Since the singers are trained to recreate certain structures in terms of vocal and physical role-taking (even if these of course can be used as performative tools in new, experimental and conceptual readings of repertoire productions) through their work with repertoire, this forms part of their performative, craft identities. This also includes the way of addressing other colleagues on the repertoire and CCVI stages, especially in productions with a very limited time for experimental and investigative rehearsals, which is mostly the case in the freelance world. In other words, the relation to the market of classical singing is ever present in the work of the singers in OI and *Impromans*. One of the most active members *in OI*, *who* was partaking as singer in the ON project, recently told me that s/he has deliberately chosen to return to traditional role-taking, embodying roles as s/he was trained, more in accordance with the voice *Fach*. S/he states that the reason for this is that it takes years to change professionalised movement patterns. As the singer regularly performs in opera repertoire, s/he hesitated to integrate the gender experimental approach further into the vocal career. In order for the improvisations to work, there is a need for frames, and, as this singer claims, the conventional frames of the voice *Fach* may still carry experimental work, although not on the symbolic level of representation.

It is indeed difficult to change the approach and movements of the body, not to forget the challenge of trying out roles assigned for other voice *Fach*. The very first time I opened Scarpia's part to practise it, I chose to work at home, since I was not sure what singers at the academy would think of me, singing a baritone part (as a singer with over twenty years of experience, I had never sung a baritone part before, not even at home). When I started to work with it, trying out the music I had heard performed by powerful male voices from stage so many times, I believed the ceiling would literally fall in over my head.

Since that first personal encounter with Scarpia, my own early daring steps singing in a lower register have developed further from the performance in the ON project. I have worked with my mezzo soprano tessitura, and sometimes still feel like a beginner. Even more, it has been more complex than I imagined to meet old teachers and colleagues and name myself a mezzo soprano in some contexts, for instance when being framed as alto in public performances of Handel's Messiah during the last couple of years. In the analysis of the Helsingborg performance in April 2017 (Video example 4), I have noted that I intuitively used the soprano tessitura. This was no conscious choice during the performance, as I was fully engaged in the images of my inner landscape in dialogue with Conny. The discourse of the classical concert hall, the arena for performing classical vocal repertoire, may also have affected my intuitive choice. I have now come to the conclusion to include both of these *Fach* voices into my professional singer identity. From my rehearsal notes I read:

I also perceive how used we are to take certain roles, or opera singer idioms, and how it can be connected to our voices as *Fach*. A great deal of capital is invested in the voice and body connected to a *Fach*. Perhaps we simply don't want to waive our vocal techniques in favour of new readings, since the instrumental aspect of singing is so central (notes, March 2013).

All of these examples bear witness of experiences made through the explorative work conducted in the context of CCVI. In this way, the classical improvising singers challenge their habitus as singers, by articulating experiences.

Towards a performative approach

The classical singer's critical artistic agency is usually quite limited in music production. Although our voices do 'sound out loud' in performance, critical debate is seldom spelled out among singers. This thesis challenges traditional views on the classical sounding musical work, or product, and questions professional roles,

positions and qualitative paradigms in structures of production, perception and evaluation in the contemporary field of classical/art music performance¹⁰⁷. The CCVI performances and analytical investigations that form part of this research project display artistic and analytical insights that can contribute to the problematizing of the professional role, or the habitus of the Western classical singer. In order for us as performers to articulate our agency, it is vital to be aware of the social frames of the performative situation at hand, and of the creative discourses they include. They can be useful analytical tools in the work with concretizing how structures of interaction emerge, and how cultural capital is transferred through the interplay between actors in the classical music field (Heikinheimo, 2009).

The use of musico-performative tropes is a way of transferring artistic values, techniques, knowledge and notions of quality in a traditional performance tradition. As such, it is also transferred by teachers in the form of master – student or conductor – performer relations, where the novice demonstrates respect towards the tradition by learning to shape a piece of music from significant others. It is a vital part of the practice of all classical performers, a way of relating to significant others (Wilén, manuscript submitted for publication a) in order to achieve and signal cultural capital as part of the habitus as classical performer. Musico-performative tropes in vocal repertoire can concern ways of interpreting scores from a musical point of view, such as timbre, phrasing and expression, but also how singers become part of the market of opera and other classical performance genres. Classical singers interpret roles in accordance with specific voice *Fach*. This also concerns how the contexts of the classical performance practices are framed and keyed, socially, and culturally. At a structural level, limited space is allowed for a singer to articulate a critical discussion or understanding of the cultural capital transferred. This means that performers seldom have the space to choose their performative approach themselves. As wonderful and as rich as they may be, these approaches are instead offered to them by tradition and significant others, who have set the performative frames of the context, and become embodied as parts of the performer's professional performance identity.

Willingly or not, all performers must take positions in musical performative discourses. In practice this means labelling oneself, as well as being labelled, with certain expectations when it comes to role-taking in performance, in relation to the material at hand, performance traditions, co-performers, the audience, and society as a whole. These expectations in turn shape the habitus of the classical singer, which

¹⁰⁷ See article 5, Wilén manuscript submitted for publication b, above.

furthermore affects the creative and social possibilities and the artistic agency for the singer as actor.

The paths I have chosen in this project may enrich the methodological map for researching singers and instrumentalists. The experiences achieved and perspectives on an individual and symbolic level make sustainable, structural changes possible in the long run. Challenging the norms of our practice, by necessity, involves tools by which we may challenge ourselves. The iterative acts of the CCVI improvisations, documented and mediated in this dissertation project, can contribute to a wider spectrum of how vocal classical performance and the agency of the classical singer may be articulated, perceived and discussed in society today.

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- Wilén, S. (manuscript submitted for publication b). *Classical vocal improvisation in context – the musical canon, gender and creativity*.

Project production information

Opera Nova, power, gender, remix (ON)

This project was initiated by me and carried out in 2012 by Operaimprovisatörerna with support from the Swedish Arts Council, the City of Stockholm and the Helge Ax:son Johnson foundation.

Sista Minuten – ett operaäventyr! (SM)

This was developed as an independent project by Oi.

Gravity of Life

This project was carried out with the support from Musikverket, Region Skåne, City of Stockholm, the Helge Ax:son Johnson foundation and in cooperation with Inter Arts Center.

Facets

The laborations were carried out as an explorative part of the doctoral project in the context of Malmö Academy of Music and in cooperation with Inter Arts Center.

Vernissage

The performance was developed as an independent explorative project in the context of Malmö Academy of Music.

Audio Activists

The pilot was carried as an explorative part of the doctoral project out in the context of Malmö Academy of Music in cooperation with Inter Arts Center.

Improvisation exhibition

This was developed as an explorative part of the doctoral project in cooperation with Inter Arts Center.

Chronological list of CCVI projects and performances (examples)

2017

Impromans: *Salong Impromans*, Helsingborgs Konserthus, Malmö Academy of Music

Hertzbreakerz/Ars Nova: *Materiality II*, Inter Arts Center, Malmö

OI: *Last Minute, an Opera Adventure!*, Gävle Symfoniorkester

OI: *Gravity of Life V*, Roslagens Kammarensemble, Norrtälje

2016

OI: *Gravity of Life IV*, Hjorthagens Vokalensemble, Hjorthagens kyrka

OI: *Last Minute – an Opera Adventure!* Svenska Kammarorkestern

OI: *Gravity of Life III*; Danderyds Gymnasium, Danderyds Gymnasium

OI: *Gravity of Life II*, Lars Erik Larsson-gymnasiet, Magle konserthus

OI: *Gravity of Life I*, Svanholm Singers, Carolinae Damkör, Fernströmska Aulan

Impromans: Salon and exhibition, Suellska Villan, Malmö

OI: Mozart i Karlshamn

2015

Impromans: Performance, Swedish Research Council Symposium, IAC

Impromans: *Salon Orenaes*, Danmark

Impromans: Lecture Performance Kulturnatten, Pufendorf Institute, Lund

Mirrors of Time, Metropolia opera course and performance, Helsinki

Audio Activists, Inter Arts Center, Malmö

OI: Opera Nova for Young People, Tyresö

Vernissage, Staffanstorps Konsthall

OI: Ögonblick av Opera, Lund

OI: *Opera i Juletid*, Olympiateatern, Stockkholm

Performance *Antihimlakroppar och drömmar*, Connect festival, IAC

OI performance, Lund

2014

Impromans: *Facets*, Tacit or Loud symposium, IAC

Students: *Mirrors of Time*, Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, Helsinki

Students: *Mozart Scenes and Improvisation*, Malmö Academy of Music

Impromans: Lecture performance, Skissernas Museum, Lund

OI: *Mozart i stan*, Swedish tour

OI: Ögonblick av Opera, Norrköping

Improvise to Improve, Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, Helsinki

Impromans performance at book release, Pufendorfinstitutet, Lund

2013

Impromans, Lecture performance, Odeum, Lund

Oi: Mozart i stan, tour

OI: Guests in *Opera! Sex, lögner och opera*, series in Swedish Radio.

2012

OI: Opera Nova – power, love, lemix, Moment:teater, Gubbängen

OI: Opera nova – power, love, remix, Vadtstna Gamla Teater

OI: Opera nova – power, love, remix, Teaterhuset Bastionen

2011

OI: *Rena, Rama Operan*, Teater Pero, Stockholm

Impromans, *A La Minute*, performance at Ribersborgs Café, Malmö

Impromans: Lecture performance at Malmö City Library

Impromans: Performance at EPARM, Belgrade

OI: Mozart i Ystad

OI: *Ögonblick av Opera*, Swedish tour

2010

OI: *Ögonblick av Opera*, Boulevardteatern, Stockholm

Article 1

Singing in action- intertextual and interperformative play in opera improvisation

Published 2013 in Frisk, H. and Östersjö, S. (eds.), *(Re)thinking improvisation: artistic explorations and conceptual writing*. (pp 129-138). Malmö: Malmö Academy of Music, Lund University.

This paper is a further discussion that relates to the contents, themes and notions of my presentation “Singing in action, creating music, text, and action in opera improvisation” from the session “Text and Action” during the International Sessions on Artistic Research within the research project (Re)thinking Improvisation in Malmö. The roundtable discussion that followed sparked ideas that, together with other tracks that were already present in the presentation I made, has directed my further work on this text.

At the centre of my PhD-project is my own practice as a classical singer and vocal improviser, doing interactive performances in different contexts, mainly opera improvisation. The research material consists of documentation and experiences from rehearsals, performances and documented discussions that are analyzed and/or discussed in relation to literature and performances from different fields, such as music, opera, theatre, cultural theory, anthropology, music education, literary studies and fiction. The research studies give way to an intertwining between artistic work and literary studies that create new lines of action and ideas that are fruitful in the artistic processes and innovation of opera improvisation techniques.

During the first year of my research studies, my main focus has been to examine and describe my own opera improvisational practice by working with what I call analytic etudes. I have made etudes of analysis in action (seen from an actor’s perspective),

from a rhetorical perspective (in comparing an improvised song, *impromans*, with the structure of a rhetorical speech), and of circumstances of the speech situations and initiatives taken among the performers in opera improvisation performances. In order to contextualize the practice, I have also begun a historic overview of uses of vocal improvisation in European opera and poetry. The present paper is concerned with establishing a theoretical framework that can situate my practice in contemporary thought. The analytical focus on my practice will also be guided by theoretical concepts from cultural theory. I will argue that the concepts of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1992) and interperformativity (Parks, 1988) suggest a highly relevant theoretical set of concepts for a better understanding of opera improvisation as a postmodern phenomenon.

Historical context of vocal improvisation in Europe

According to Esterhammer (2008) poetic improvisation¹⁰⁸ reached its peak in Italy through the artistic practice of *improvvisatrici* (female vocal improvisers) and *improvvisatori* (male vocal improvisers) during the 18th century. The tradition has been noted in different variants in other European countries such as Greece, Spain, Germany, Great Britain (Wales) and the former Yugoslavia (Esterhammer, 2008). Improvisation was also a part of the practice for opera singers of 18th century *opera seria* (Somerset-Ward, 2004) as well as during the 19th century (Damoureau, 1997), practices that were mirrored also in instrumental music in Europe until the mid 1850's.

In Italy, the practice of poetic lyrical improvisation was widely spread among both women and men in different social classes of the community, while the *improvvisatori* and *improvvisatrici* performed in theatres and salons as well as in the taverns and on the streets (Esterhammer, 2008). Writers and composers have depicted vocal improvisers in their works, among them Germaine de Staël (*Corinne*, 1807) and H. C. Andersen (*Improvvisatoren*, 1835). To give an image of the practice of poetic lyrical improvisation, I choose to quote a section from the novel *Corinne*, by de Staël. The main character, Corinne, is an Italian *improvvisatrice* and poet, who improvises words and music in interaction with her audience, to her own accompaniment on the lyre. When the heroine in the beginning of the book is asked

¹⁰⁸ The genre is perhaps better described as “poetic lyrical improvisation” which may be in verse or in prose, song or declamation, often with instrumental accompaniment.

if she prefers works of reflection or works of sudden improvisation, she returns the question in the following manner:

To me, improvisation is like a lively conversation. I don't let myself be bound by any particular subject, I go along with the impression that my listener's interest make on me, and it is to my friends that I owe the greatest part of my talent in this field. Sometimes the passionate interest aroused in me by a conversation [...] raises me above my powers, enables me to discover in nature, in my own heart, bold truths expressions full of life, which solitary reflection would not have produced. (De Staël, 2008, pp. 45-46),

By the mid 19th century, this practice began to fade in Italy, as did the improvisational practice of classically trained musicians (Bailey, 1992). According to Goehr (2007) this change occurred as a consequence of the development of the work concept and the change of the role of the composer.

Opera improvisation as an artistic practice

Opera improvisation as an artistic and pedagogic practice is found today in countries such as Sweden, England and U.S.A. My artistic research focuses on my own practice as a performer in different ensembles and contexts, such as *Operaimprovisatörerna* (an ensemble founded in 2007, with 10 singers and 2 pianists) and *Impromans*¹⁰⁹ (a voice/piano duo improvising with inspiration from *Lied* and other classical vocal traditions). I describe opera improvisation and *impromans* in terms of extemporization, or instantaneous composing, performed by classical singers and musicians. In each performance, new musical and dramatic material is created, as a result of the situated interactive processes.

During my research studies, I have identified a number of factors that are important in order to understand the basis for this genre of improvised vocal music. First, we are all classically trained singers and musicians working with idiomatic improvisation¹¹⁰ building on conventions in Western opera and classical or contemporary art music drawing inspiration from different styles and individual composers. Second, we have the outspoken intention not to repeat any previously performed material, be it words, music or action. The vocal, musical and scenic

¹⁰⁹ Romans is Swedish for art song, hence, *impromans* is a pun with improvisation and "romans".

¹¹⁰ My understanding of idiomatic improvisation is closely related to the discussion of Tandberg (2007) who emphasizes the considered play with musical form, be it in historic or contemporary style, as a key feature of such practices.

interaction and dialogues and the intentions of the opera improvisers create the sounding and visual emerging contents. We rehearse and elaborate techniques and forms for improvisation in terms of communicational and dramaturgical structures, but very rarely by deciding harmonic patterns or other musical forms.

Third, costume is always neutral in terms of gender since we work from the conviction that the gender of the performer on stage is created through performative interaction. The ambition is also to work from a flat structure, where the singers have equal possibilities to take on different roles in a drama. Fourth, the structure of the performances is decided by the interaction within the group of performers but also very specifically in the co-creative role that is given to the audience. Fifth, the stage design is also improvised in interaction between a lighting designer and the actors.

Music, text and meaning: structuralism, poststructuralism and deconstruction

What then are the intertextual layers in opera improvisation? Is opera improvisation, with its focus on performativity, not in direct opposition to the conception of music as text? According to the organist Adrian Cyprian Love (2008), the focus of referring to music only as written text, thereby neglecting the aspect of time, is an example of the "the Platonic urge to dehistoricize musical experience into a timeless essence of itself" (p. 51).

In his discussion of myth as a semiologic, structural system of ideology, used in society, Roland Barthes (1973/2009) claims that any material can be given meaning, wherein, for example, pictures become "a kind of writing as soon as they are meaningful: like writing they call for a *lexis*" (p. 262, author's italics). He argues that different forms of cultural utterances, or units of significance, both verbal and visual, could be defined as speech, discourse or language. Barker (2008) argues along the same lines that "the concept of text suggests not simply the written word, though it is one of its senses, but all practices that signify" (ibid p. 11). Lönnroth (2011), in a discussion of oral poetry, suggests the notion of 'oral text', referring not only to words but also the human voice, gestures, music, facial expressions, acting, interaction with the audience and the relationship to the place of the performance. It is in this understanding of 'text' that an intertextual perspective on opera improvisation becomes useful.

Dialogism

By the 1920s, Bakhtin had already argued that Saussure's concept of language as a definite, abstract system ignored the fact that language embodies and reflects social class, values, positions and interests (Allen, 2011). Utterances show a dialogical feature: "All utterances are dialogic, their meaning and logic dependent upon how they will be received by others" (ibid, p. 19). Allen argues that in Dostoyevsky's work, Bakhtin found that characters were presenting individual, different, coexistent, and sometimes contradictory worldviews or ideas, in a polyphony of speech, echoing of transformations and sometimes parodies of existing speech genres. Bakhtin came to create a theory of literature, where this can be defined as a dialogical discourse, set in contrast to monologic discourses, where the writer's own voice predominates (Dyndahl, 2005b).

Barthes (1977), perceives an overwhelming focus on the author as a person, and refutes this monological writing, claiming the death of the author. He even refutes the term writing for the creation of a text, instead emphasizing the performative aspect, pointing out that the utterance "has no other content (contains no other propositions) than the act by which it is uttered..." (p. 146). He describes the writer as a 'scriptor' or a copyist, although with a vast dictionary and a power to "mix writings, to counter the ones with the other, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them" (p. 146). All this is done in order to put focus on the reader, as he sees the reader as a destination, a space where all the different quotations that the text consists of are written, creating a unity. Allen (2011) claims that poststructuralists refer to a general loss of subject in language, a fact which Dyndahl (2005b) sees as somewhat negative, as different subjects thereby could remain invisible, while still affecting the text.

Intertextuality, bricolage and hypertext

Poststructuralists claim that literary as well as non-literary texts lack independent meaning, since they are constructed on existing systems with traditions and codes from earlier literature, which in turn have a decisive role in the process of deciphering the texts (Allen, 2011). Meaning is grasped in a web of textual relations between a new text and preexisting texts: "the text becomes the intertext" (ibid p. 1). Julia Kristeva (1992) coined the term intertextuality, where text "is perceived as a productive combination and transformation of semiotic codes, discursive genres, materials, and meaning..." (Dyndahl, 2008, p. 131). Kristeva was one of the writers of the French journal *Tel Quel*, together with Barthes, Derrida and Foucault. Allen

(2011) outlines how Kristeva transformed the dialogism of Bakhtin into two-dimensional semiotics, where the horizontal dimension of a word belongs to both reader and writer, and the vertical dimension orients versus an existing corpus of literature. Thus, the text became intertextual, both in the way in which the author communicated with readers, and in the way it relates to texts of the past inside the space of the work's text. Kristeva identified two contrasting forces in a text; the *genotext*, which aims to transcend boundaries, and the *phenotext*, which wants to be perceived as unified (Dyndahl 2005b). It may be noted that this could be referred to Bakhtin, who according to Allen (2011) also described two forces within language, the 'unofficial' and the 'official' interests respectively. The unofficial interests are represented for instance by a carnival, which "celebrates the unofficial collective body of the people and stands against the official ideology and discourse of religious and state power" (Allen, 2011, p. 21).

Allen (2011) claims that intertextuality today is found in discussions regarding all different art forms and productions, such as music, architecture and film. Different art forms produce patterns of complexity that are comparable to languages, in the manner that they need to be coded and decoded. He describes how we, in order to interpret an artwork, use our previous knowledge to relate it to other art works of the kind. Berger (1999) points out that the cultural context is of great importance to creators of artistic texts, these creators being heavily (and consciously or unconsciously) influenced by their own social and cultural environment.

Bricolage is a key concept in postmodernism¹¹¹ referring to the self aware citation of one text within another, indicating a bigger cultural self-consciousness, since "postmodern culture is marked by a self-conscious intertextuality" (Allen 2008, p. 203). It is also a sign of a historical blurring, where the past and the present are presented together. Allen (2011) refers to postmodern architecture as intertextual, in mixing styles from different times and social contexts, high and low culture, celebrating pluralism. He also gives several examples of how intertextuality is present in the popular remaking of novels by writers such as Shakespeare and Austen into film.

Genette defines hypertext as connections between texts where the text B, or the 'hypertext', is using a text A, or the 'hypotext' as a point of departure (Dyndahl 2005a). Dyndahl writes about hypertext and musical spatio-temporality and makes

¹¹¹ For instance, Derrida (2001) refers to *bricolage* as a critique against language, where the parts that are to be instantly used are already present, but not chosen, or even known, by the user, or *bricoleur*. He describes language as a structure, a centerless field (since there is no central signified of absolute, transcendent meaning) an infinite play with signs and significations within discourses, a "movement of supplementarity" (p. 365).

note of how the practice of sampling culture rely on intertextuality. Here you encounter a common global, intermedial supply of cultural utterances to reuse in terms of esthetical cultural fragments, or recontextualizing existing music pieces in new, polyphonic montages. The culture of sampling, according to Dyndahl, is to be seen as manifestations of a dialogical principle that as a result decenters the closed work, or the text.

Intertextuality and genre in performance

Bauman (2004) describes a contemporary Icelandic storyteller's (re)telling of an old story as a "part of the discursive work by which he accomplishes his performance" (p. 2). The relation that links the storyteller's story to the ancient story is a kind of intertextual interaction, a part of the narrative performance. Bauman defines intertextuality as "the relational orientation of a text to other texts" (p. 4). He sees it as a key element in oral poetics since the 17th century, when it comes to describing the juncture between premodern and modern epochs in language and culture. Bauman hence claims that intertextuality refers not only to the mediation of a preexisting text, but also to the communicative practice through which it is produced and received. Social life is constituted and reproduced by discourse through signifying practices such as acts of speaking that are "simultaneously anchored in their situational contexts of use and transcendent of them, linked by interdiscursive relationships to other situations, other acts, other utterances." (ibid). He says that these interdiscursive ties are generated through history into cultural repertoires which function as established "orienting frameworks for the production, reception, and circulation of discourse." (p. 2)

Bauman (2004) defines genre as "one order of speech style, a constellation of systematically related, co-occurrent formal features and structures that serves as a conventionalized orienting framework for the production and reception of discourse" (p. 3) such as a certain kind of text. In a situated production, these conventionalized frameworks refer to prior situational contexts, thereby presenting a generic intertextuality. A genre in this way evokes certain associations and expectations about fundamental parts of the situational context. In performance, these parts may constitute settings, scenarios, structures or roles for the participants and goals. Bauman argues that genre is a primary means "for the expressive enactment of subjectivity" (p. 6), whereas different genres lead to various subject positions and formations.

The intertextual gap in parody

Parody is described by Berger (1999) as an example of intertextuality, a conscious quotation of a text, a genre or a style, from someone else's work. Hutcheon (2000) describes parody as a genre that both debunks and implies strength, defining it "as a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity" (p. xii). She sees parody as a key concept when describing the postmodern use of reproduction as a means of critically problematizing the representational process whereby the notions of artistic originality, ownership and values are questioned.

Hutcheon addresses parody in music as a means of commenting on itself from within, "through parodious reworkings of previous music" (ibid 2000, p. 3). Irony implies both involvement and distance, requiring a shared set of codes to be understood. Hutcheon lists two different kinds of parody in music. The first mainly concerns the transformation of existing musical forms, by using previous material, often without irony, which is close to the Renaissance practice of imitation. This kind of parody is used by composers such as Stravinskij, by using another musical style, though from a distance, creating a "repetition with difference" (p. 65) which Hutcheon finds to result in a stylistic dichotomy. The second, more traditional or conservative kind of parody, is described as a composition coloured by a humorous intent, by for instance using themes or phrases in inappropriate contexts, as in Debussy's recalling of Tristan and Isolde in his piece *Golliwog's cake walk*.

Bauman (2004) focuses mainly on the communication of preexistent texts, or source utterances, in different genres of oral poetry, and uses the term mediation in order to describe "relaying of spoken messages through intermediaires" (2004, p. 129). These messages can also have written sources, such as in the Mexican coloquio; a form of extensive traditional drama performed in festivals. The actors are supported by individual prompters, who are situated outside the stage and are fully audible to the audience; often prompting with whole lines, which are then repeated by the actor. The Hermit is a burlesque character who, by making contradicting puns of the lines given to him, has the role of challenging and inverting the textual authority, in terms of the written text (the source utterance). In this way, an intertextual gap is created between the source utterance and the intermediary, which can be seen as a use of parody, a playful inversion of a prior text or genre, here symbolizing authority.

Identity and subjectivity in musical performance

The field of cultural studies from the 1990s explores issues of subjectivity and identity from an anti-essentialist perspective, where identities are created as products of discourses, or discursive constructions (Barker 2008). Subjectivity defines the cultural and biological processes of becoming a person, as well as how the subject experiences herself. Identity may be divided into two concepts: self-identity, as in how we describe ourselves to other persons and the emotional identification with those descriptions and social identity, which refers to other people's expectations and opinions of us.) Stuart Hall (1996) describes a discrepancy between the descriptions made by the subject from within and the descriptive identity provided by the Other. He discusses a meeting point, the "point of *suture*" (p. 5, writer's italics) between the two as a temporary attachment to a subject position (as a social subject) allotted for an individual by a particular discursive practice.

Dyndahl and Weider Ellefsen (2009) discuss a Foucauldian perspective of creating identity in contrast to a postmodern way of daily life. They state that identity both "denotes the subjectivizing, discursively constructed 'truth about ourselves' ..." (p. 12) and relate to different mobile connections in terms of "available social positions, roles and patterns of behaviour within a field of power regulations and structures" (ibid). In this way they mean that an articulation of the identity will lead to the construction of subjectivity as well as discourse, thereby possibly questioning certain categories. This performative stance is embraced also by Frith (1996), who argues that making or listening to music is best understood as a self in process, referring to identity as "an experiential process which is most vividly grasped as music." (p. 110) Social groups, on the other hand, "get to know themselves and values as groups" (p. 111, writer's italics) making aesthetic judgements. "Music, like identity, is both performance and story [...]" (p. 109). Edward Cone (2008) makes a distinction between the 'vocal persona' of the singer as being in the situated fiction of the role and the 'musical persona', where the singer herself is aware of all the aspects of singing, but I find that these notions do not cover all the other perspectives detected above. How then can the various 'texts' at play in an opera improvisation be understood?

The fluid identities in opera improvisation

The approach for an opera improviser in a scene is to first define the situation and her own role and function in this situation and second, to sense how the scene emerges by blending the intentions and wills of the improvisers as well as ‘her’ subjective aims and goals. Needless to say, the improvising performer is constantly shifting between various perspectives on identity. At the same time as the opera improviser is present as a character in the situational context and negotiating the nature of these relations in the moment she is also there as an individual, perceiving the other individuals as colleagues. There is also a multiple perception of musical time and the demand to reflect upon how the choices made in this situation will affect the story as a whole.¹¹² Examples of other roles or perspectives includes tuning in the audience’s reactions and sometimes making asides, (or “lyrical bubbles” as it is referred to in the ensemble *Operaimprovisatörerna*) but also the intra-musical perspective of a professional singer, focusing on the musical interaction with the others inspired by a certain style or idiom.

The *suture* and *interperformativity* in musical interaction

I would like to argue that the perspectives of the opera improviser refer to many parallel processes of subjectivity and identity that are enacted/constructed simultaneously or quickly in succession (Dyndahl and Weider Ellefsen 2009), The relationships between the fictive characters are defined in a dialogic interaction, sometimes internally within one improviser and sometimes in collaboration with other improvisers. An important communication code in opera improvisation is that the subject position chosen by the improviser herself should stand back to the one given to her from outside. This can be seen as the *suture* described by Hall (1996) (as mentioned above) where the processes of the subject differ from the identity given to her by others. This corresponds with Sawyer’s (2003) description of the improvisational processes in theatre and jazz, where the improvising group evaluates an individual member's contribution by how it affects the emerging improvisation. Oscillating between different perspectives in interaction is an example of how an opera improviser decenters herself, as well as is been decentered by others, as she is taking part in different, parallel, and sometimes clashing, discourses.

Haring (1988) coined the term ‘interperformance’ to describe the relation of entailment between different genres of folklore performance, such as imitations,

parodies and homages, and the different discourses that create them. Looking at literary texts he assigns and compares the term interperformance to intertextuality. To me, the term appears to bring together many of the concepts discussed above with features characteristic of opera improvisation.

Literary researcher Ward Parks (1988) makes a similar comparison, as he discusses the relation between text and performance in the oral tradition of the tale Beowulf. He claims that intertextuality focuses mainly on text as a materialized object, and argues that the concept of *interperformativity* is more relevant when it comes to oral literature, that is being performed:

Authors and readers, in standard written communication, do not encounter one another directly. Rather they encounter physical texts, usually (in the present era) in the form of visible signs in dark ink on a light paper background. The oral performance, by contrast, unfolds more fluidly in time, subsists more in the relationship between communication principals than as an individuated object term. To reduce interperformativity to intertextuality, then, would be to presuppose the very thing (the text) that has not yet happened. (Parks 1988 p. 27)

Following Parks (1988) and Haring (1988) I refer to the play with performative discourses of opera in opera-improvisation as interperformativity. The specific kind of intertextuality, with the many layers of performativity that it brings to play, is indeed better described in terms of *interperformativity*. The opera-improvisers sing and play in and through action, and thus take part in a constant intertextual and interperformative play, commenting on both musical and performative aspects of opera and classical music as genres.

Opera improvisation in a postmodern perspective

Barker (2008) points out different traits of postmodernism, such as aesthetic self-consciousness, self-reflexiveness and the blurring of the boundaries of genre, history, style, culture and art, and high and low culture. He defines postmodernism as the end of epistemology, since all truths are created within discourse, and culture-specific. He delineates four main features that are central to a postmodern attitude. I list them here, followed by my own reflections in relation to opera improvisational practice (Barker, 2008, p.200).

A sense of the fragmentary, ambiguous and uncertain nature of living

The improvised nature of opera improvisation does indeed give it a sense of uncertainty, ambiguity and fragmentation. Paradoxically it also creates a feeling of safety in that the opera improvisation is not able to enact by way of control, but only through listening to and communicating with the other performers and with the audience. But what is it really? Is it contemporary performance art, entertainment or simply a continuation of a classical tradition? This ambiguity is part and parcel of the practice of idiomatic improvisation in a postmodern context.

An awareness of the centrality of contingency

The presence of contingency, or the absence of contents, also provides a feeling of security, as we as performers are prepared in terms of pragmatic, musicodramatic and communicational strategies. We don't know what to say but we know how. We do not know the message but we know the media.

A recognition of cultural difference

Since opera improvisation is performed in many different contexts, an awareness of and openness to the audience is necessary. One of the goals with opera improvisation is to communicate opera as a genre to new audiences that are not accustomed to opera or classical music. Sometimes this results in performances in the audience's own working places or schools. As opera improvisers we represent the traditions of classical music and may therefore be in minority; a cultural difference in relation to the preferences of the general audience. It is necessary to be open and prepared, to meet and sometimes improvise on themes and topics you know very little, in order to bridge these gaps. Communication with the audience is essential in opera improvisation, and it is vital to create a generous and positive environment in order to invite the individuals of the audience to speak in a public setting, making suggestions for the contents of the improvisations.

An acceleration in the pace of living

The creative and interactive processes in opera improvisation are very swift. Often you have only a couple of seconds to decide on matters of great importance to the improvisation as a whole, or in the communication with the audience. Compared to opera composition, where a piece can take several years to complete, opera improvisation could be said to accelerate the processes to the absurd. We should however bear in mind that a composed opera

cannot be compared to opera improvisation. After all, the opera (a musicodramatic work, fixed in a libretto and a musical score) is created to be repeated, hopefully for many years, whereas the opera improvisation evaporates after a single performance, and should never be repeated.

Intertextuality, interperformativity and parody in opera improvisation

I find that Bauman's (2004) description of how genres, through different kinds of invocations of generic, intertextual framing, bring certain expectations of how the following discourse will develop, is immediately connected to how I work as an opera improviser. Although different genres lead to various subject positions and formations, according to the conventions of discourse connected to a genre, the play with idioms within and indeed juxtapositions of stylistic traits that characterize entire genres, is one of the strongest characteristics of our improvisatory practice. Baumann argues that genre is a primary means "for the expressive enactment of subjectivity" (p. 6) This is also how I experience opera improvisation, as a playground for a spontaneous dialogue with genres that also become a vehicle for immediate expressions of different layers of subjectivity.

In a field where preparedness for the unexpected is crucial, performing extemporated opera and *impromans* becomes the interface between inner and external impulses, where the opera improvisers get access to their own knowledge and experience on a deeper level, through the interaction with the other performers and the idioms of the genres at play. These interactions become musicodramatic gestalts that connect to the opera genre(s) by way of the singers' and musicians' own knowledge and experience of vocal and instrumental techniques, idiomatic features in the music and musical dramaturgy, as well as for the creation of the fictive characters of the performance. This is what I, referring to Parks (1988) and Haring (1988) would call interperformativity and as an expansion of Baumann's discussion of parody and the play with genres.

Is opera improvisation then a postmodern phenomenon? It is very common that the audience laughs during our performances of opera improvisation, even when the dramatic situation on stage is serious. From my experience, this may happen for a lot of reasons, such as:

- the audience's expectations of repertoire opera singers and opera repertoire are not being fulfilled
- insecurity about what is going to happen

- hearing your own and other's suggestions, images and fantasies become integrated and decisive to the emergency of a live stage performance.

According to Allen (2001), many theorists connect post modernism with concepts of imitation, mixing of existing styles and practices and pastiche. He claims that the postmodern cultural climate requires a distance or irony in the utterances or representations to be taken seriously. I do believe that the practice of opera improvisation, though drawing on many improvisational practices of the past, is indeed a highly postmodern artistic expression.

I suggest that the examples above illustrate how some of the audience's discursive formations are being subverted, thereby creating a space for release and reorientation towards new discourses and subject positions. In terms of expectations on the characters and their aims, as well as the situational context, a discourse is constructed based on the singers' and audience's experiences of how opera repertoire in different styles is performed. The improvisers can invert this discourse and create a gap in the performance through ironical distance, while still using the vocal techniques of opera, and thereby identifying and conveying themselves (partly) as opera singers. In opera improvisation, the audience regularly perceives the improvised lyrics, or the sung lines, directly. I think it has to do with the fact that the sung words are performed in action and with intention, and that the understanding of the situational context is emerging simultaneously to the audience and the improvisers. These musical and performative discourses, transformed by improvisational strategies, can relate to several of the descriptions of parody above: Berger (1999) by transforming genre or style (1999), Hutcheon (2000) as transforming preexistent forms, mostly without irony, and Bauman (2004) where the intertextual gap is widened when inverting the authority of the prior genre.

The play with performative discourses of opera and vocal classical music as it has been discussed here and the interaction between the multiple expressions of subjectivity makes the term interperformativity (Parks, 1988) a highly relevant figure of thought in the discussion of this postmodern phenomenon. The opera improvisers, while singing in action, take part in a constant intertextual and interperformative play - in interaction with each other and with the audience - as the improvised opera continuously emerges and eventually evaporates. Thus, the musical and performative discourses of opera and classical music are transformed, or deconstructed, through improvisational strategies.

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Article 2

In search of oscillating relations – power, gender, remix in operatic performance

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Stop the operatic performance

The pianist's right hand fingers wander upwards, take a quick dance turn, and land on a melancholic chord. Don José stands very straight and tense, almost stiff, and stares darkly at an imaginary piece of paper, while trying to write down some letters. Carmen sits on a white wooden bench and looks at Don José, smiling teasingly. Someone laughs in the salon. The pianist's fingers elegantly leap along the same melody line, one octave lower. The two hands join in a repetitive dance rhythm, which tunes into different colours. Carmen rocks more intensely to the rhythm. Don José stares more intensively at the imaginative paper. Several laughs are heard in the salon. What is so funny about this situation?

The circumstances have been described to the audience. The cigarette worker Carmen has been arrested after having stabbed one of her colleagues in a fight in her working place and is kept in custody, guarded by Don José, a soldier with a violent past. Don José and Carmen are alone together in a cell. She needs to get out and he needs to keep her there, so he does not get in trouble. Carmen takes a smiling breath and is just about to start to sing, when a voice from the salon suddenly calls:

“Olé!” The music stops. The singers stop. Everyone looks in the direction of the calling voice. “Carmen forgot the hips!” the voice from the audience calls. Laughter and giggles echo through the space as the tall male singer performing Carmen smiles and gives thanks for the remark. He leaves the stage. A shorter bearded man runs on, to take his place, while the female Don José stiffens up again. It is a performance, a Carmen play. The expectations of a world-famous romantic opera are turned head over heels in an intertextual, parodic play. As soon as a spectator decides to shout “Olé!” to stop the music – and the operatic performance – the power relations of the roles of the audience and the performers in classical music are challenged.

This version of the Seguidilla scene from George Bizet’s opera derives from my experience of how a scene in the project *Opera Nova – power, love, remix (ON)* was performed. ON emanated from an idea about changing roles in opera that I had had for some time. The project started on my initiative and was carried out with the support from the Swedish Arts Council, the City of Stockholm and the Helge Ax:son Johnson foundation in different phases, in the ensemble Operaimprovisatörerna, where I am a member. Opera improvisation is a genre where actions, music, and text are created through live interaction of classically trained singers and musicians, inspired by idiomatic traits in Western classical music in dialogue with the audience (Wilén, in press). In ON, the purpose was to investigate and problematize concepts of power and gender in opera performance and in society from different perspectives, and what actions different roles, or subject positions, may allow. Opera improvisation techniques were combined with critically interpreted scenes from opera repertoire, using cross-gender acting, or cross-casting. A further aim was to investigate performative tools for classical singers. ON was a possibility for me to work with one of the research questions of my doctoral project: How can opera improvisation be used as a way of challenging performative and musical aspects of opera? ON premiered in Stockholm in March 2012, and was played on tour at Vadstena-Akademien in July, and at Bastionen in Malmö in October.

The project ON also sought to explore different medias and platforms for dialogue and exchange of experiences and knowledge, for example on-stage conversations on the theme gender and power in opera and theatre. The first stage conversation was arranged at Moment:teater in Gubbängen one week before the premiere. Two members of the panel started a dialogue that later continued in other public and social media. This was one of the starting points for a debate on opera sexism in Sweden during the spring of 2012, which illustrates how repertoire opera is perceived and performed in Sweden today (Brodrej, 2012; Dellefors, 2012; Ernman, 2012; Gademan, 2012; Hammar, 2012; Lindén, 2012; Lindkvist, 2012;

Löfvendahl, 2012; Maticic, 2012; Operaimprovisatörerna, 2012; Söderberg, 2012; Witt-Brattström, 2012).

In this text I intend to contextualize and discuss the project ON in the framework of theory from different fields, such as cultural studies, musicology, music education and performance studies, and reflected in the Swedish cultural climate. I combine different sources, such as research literature, my own experiences as a singer in different contexts, and newspaper articles connected to the debate. During the project, insights and experiences from my ongoing literary studies have influenced my artistic work. My choices of methods show similarities with both “practice-based” artistic research (Rubidge, 2012, p. 5), where the artistic work emanates from and is inspired by theoretical issues and concepts and “practice-led research”, that can derive from an “artistic hunch” aiming to locate theoretical frameworks that may be implicated in the practice (Rubidge, 2010, p. 6). My intention is to create and expand dialogues on different levels about the conditions for singing and performing in classical music and opera.

The voice and the repertoire in classical singing

According to Hemsley (2007) a singer’s voice has certain “natural limitations” (p. 64) and individual characteristics that result in a specific vocal range and vocal quality, such as light or heavy. These features determine which repertoire is suitable for the singer. He points out that the singer’s main concern is to express the contents of the score, referring to opera repertoire, written by composers like Mozart, Puccini, Verdi and Wagner. As a classical singer, I have shaped my instrument during many years’ training and through the practicing and performing of the classical repertoire. During my education and as a freelancer I have chosen (and been assigned) repertoire in collaboration with teachers, conductors, directors and coaches, connected to what I have perceived as my voice type. As a female singer with a high voice, although with a darker colour, I have performed opera roles of both lyric character, as Pamina in *The Magic Flute* (Mozart, 2006), and more dramatic character such as Violetta in *La Traviata* (Verdi, 2008), roles impersonating young women. Being fairly short with a size 36, I have also impersonated children, mostly in contemporary operas. My repertoire correlates with how Cotton (2007) describes the work of singers who launch professional careers.

Hemsley (2007) states that the opera world is increasingly dominated by a casting system where singers are encouraged to choose and profile a certain colour and

character of the voice, in order to make a career, which in turn delimits the singer's ability to develop vocal flexibility and "possibility of discovering their full expressive range and imaginative powers" (p. 66). The classical opera repertoire, including music from Mozart to Strauss, mainly contains roles written for voice types, or voice characters, where a certain colour and range, or tessitura, of the voice is connected to different characters in music.

My work with opera repertoire has led me to perceive my vocal identity as based on these kinds of roles, and on the music connected to them. It has motivated me to develop and enhance the musical and dramatic functions of this voice type, in terms of phrasing, colours of the voice, and acting. My ways of thinking about this relate to Cotton (2007), who draws an image of a singing field where voices are categorized through two systems: voice classification due to physiological facts, delineating "the capabilities and limitations of an instrument" (p. 3) and a *Fach* system of role types, depending partly on trends of the market. She describes classification as an important part of the vocal education, preparing for the "marketplace" (p. 11). The collective expectations and casting trends on vocal timbre change and vary over time, concerning for instance characteristics such as chasteness, femininity, masculinity and promiscuity, but also the body type of the singer (Cotton, 2007). The arias that are chosen for an "audition package" (p. 1) depend both on the singer's vocal qualities and expectations and trends in the casting market.

As a repertoire singer I aimed, most importantly, to interpret and perform only the given repertoire in public, in order to present myself as a classical singer. Improvisation was not relevant to me. Hultberg (2000) contrasts two different methods of instrumental training in European tonal classical music. In the 1850s a view of music as works of art developed where the composer's intentions became more important, "while less space was provided for interpreters' musical licence" (Hultberg, 2000, p. 29). "Instead of improvising [...] students played printed technical exercises in order to improve their instrumental skills" (p. 30). This is referred to as the "instrumental-technical method" (p. 30) that Hultberg holds to be taken for granted by many in the Western music tradition. My work with repertoire during my education and in professional life shows influences from the instrumental-technical method. I strived to interpret, although without altering, the contents of musical scores, even in music composed before 1850. I have been aware of my responsibility to preserve and respect the traditions in classical music.

The "practical-empirical method" (Hultberg, 2000, p. 25) was prevailing in Western music until the 1850s. The music was approached as a language, from an aural perspective. Pupils on all levels expressed themselves by understanding, playing, and

creating music according to the idiomatic features by varying and creating music from existing musical patterns (Hultberg, 2000). This can be seen as relating to “discourse in music” (Folkestad, 2012, p. 201). The practical-empirical method resembles my practice as an opera improviser, where I make up my own actions, music, and words inspired by different idioms in classical music (Wilén, in press). I notice how I often in opera improvisation choose other ways of using my voice than what is common in my work with repertoire, often singing in a lower register, as well as choosing other, more active dramatic actions on stage than I have done in the repertoire roles.

This has led me to consider whether the vocal and dramatic qualities and choices that I have mainly worked with in my repertoire work can be considered to be the only ones that are possible for me, due to the natural limitations as claimed by Hemsley (2007). This also concerns the acting on stage. Am I as a person performing everything I can do in striving to enhance young, light, happy, smart, longing or suffering passive women, children or animals in my vocal and scenic qualities? Frith (1996) sees a merger of bodily practice and imaginative fantasy as an integration of ethics and aesthetics. “Music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives” (p. 124). Could it be that some of the vocal qualities or sounds that are connected to certain roles, are results of certain discourses in the operas, rather than natural qualities that are innate in my voice and body, and that direct me towards certain sets of dramatic actions in music? How are these discourses constructed and how can I investigate these through practice?

During the last few years, I have noted that theatre institutions as well as free groups and theatre academies have chosen to perform classical repertoire plays with gender-blind casting where the parts can be performed by women as well as men. In 2006, the committee for gender equality presented the report *Taking the stage* (Kulturdepartementet, 2006, my translation). According to Lund (2009), the report pointed at certain insufficiencies in the gender equality work within Swedish performing arts. Two years after, the report *Performing gender* (Att gestalta kön, Edemo & Engvoll, 2009, my translation) was presented as a result of an artistic and educational development work performed by the four Swedish theatre academies. Hagström-Ståhl (2009) describes how the gender perspective of the project generated many new possibilities for making artistic choices.

Reading about *Performing gender* in 2010, I became very interested in trying the same strategies in opera repertoire. During the project I have studied literature

connected to cultural studies. This led me into further investigations of the concepts performativity, deconstruction, and intertextuality. Could they open new perspectives on investigating the relations between gender and performance, as well as between work and performance in opera?

Performativity in theory

Before we move on to examples from the project, I would like to contextualize my arguments in a theoretical framework rooted in feminist poststructuralist thinking. Foucault (2009) claims that discourse is the site where power and knowledge are joined together, in discontinuous, unstable segments that can be played in different strategies. Weedon (2009) describes discourse as the structuring principle of society in modes of thinking, individual subjectivity, and social institutions. Analyses of the social and institutional contexts of discourse are a means to examine and question relations of power in feminist poststructuralism.

According to Butler (1997), the performative is a domain where power acts as discourse. The term performativity derives from Austin (2004), who in his lecture series “How to do things with words” describes a performative utterance as an utterance where the saying of certain words or phrases is actually doing something, as in a marriage ceremony. Judith Butler (2004) developed this concept into the performativity theory, claiming that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed, rather it is an identity... instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 154). In this way, gender exists mainly through its representations, as a type of performance (Rosenberg, 2000). In *Operaimprovisatörerna*, we work in a similar way. Both men and women wear the same costumes with jackets and skirts, to open up possibilities for the singers to choose gender as a result of the situation in the improvised scenes.

Butler (2007) claims that gender is not an essence, but a social construction, a frail identity that has been created in outer spaces over time, as an effect of a stylization of the body, due to survival strategies in a coercive system. The incessant use of body gestures, movements, and styles creates an illusion of a stable, gender defined, and natural self, which rather can be considered as reflecting a norm. If the repetition fails, as for instance in a deformed or parodic repetition, the impression of a stable identity is revealed as a political, weak construction. “In this sense, gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express” (Butler, 2009, p. 232). Butler asks in which performance, and on which scene, the performativity

in gender could be revealed in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire (2007).

According to Bell (2007), Butler's work has turned the concept of performativity into an analytical tool for studying differentiated subject positions within structures that delineate certain lines and effects of power. Weedon (2009) sees the range of subject positions offered by language as situated in specific historical and social discourses. To me this relates to how I perceive that the singer in opera improvisation uses altering subject positions as she decentres herself, or is decentered by others, in the emergent improvised fictive and rhetorical situations (Wilén, in press).

Although dominated by music, opera is by no means neutral in terms of gender. According to McClary (2002), opera became an incentive display of gender construction in composing music.

Beginning with the rise of opera in the seventeenth century, composers worked painstakingly to develop a musical semiotics of gender: a set of conventions for constructing "masculinity" and "femininity" in music. The codes marking gender difference in music are informed by the prevalent attitudes of their time. But they also themselves participate in social formation, inasmuch as individuals learn how to be gendered beings through their interactions with cultural discourses such as music. (pp. 7-8)

Consequently, singers who perform a certain repertoire over time are shaped by the vocal discourses they work with. McClary declares some codes as "strikingly resilient" (2002, p. 8), and compares the portrayal of feminine seductiveness and masculine bravura in 20th century films about Indiana Jones to music in 17th century operas. McClary claims that this is a sign that some social attitudes on gender have proven stable over time. She therefore argues that studies of music from the vantage point of musical semiotics of gender "can also provide insights into social history itself" (ibid). Löfvendahl (2012) claims that although opera today is considered a serious art form, it has always been coloured by commercial interests. He notes that Puccini's famed operas build on popular stage plays dominated by sentimental and exciting traits, including sadism, as in today's thriller films.

Relations between work, performance, and text

In order to look into how the role of the musical work affects the performance circumstances in opera, I now choose to investigate and discuss some concepts connected to work and text.

According to Goehr (2007), in classical music the score is synonymous with the work, and, hence, has a regulative function. The performance of a classical piece is conducted through interpreting and showing respect to a score. The concepts of work and text in classical music are practically synonymous. Following Goehr (2007), a musical work is “a complex structure of sounds related in some important way to a composer, a score, and a given class of performances” (p. 20). She describes the concept of *Werktreue* that emerged in Europe in the 19th century. The performer should “comply as perfectly as possible with the scores composers provided” (p. 231). This is relevant in opera performance even today. Dellefors (2012) commented on the debate on opera sexism by pointing out that the role of both the director and the conductor are to realize the intentions of the composer as they are delivered in the score. They are not supposed to enhance themselves.

In performing opera repertoire, I have often come across the conception of the music as the most important part. To sing a part in repertoire opera of for instance Verdi or Mozart is indeed a very inspiring, exciting, and technically demanding job, where the musical performance to a high degree must be in focus. But is it enough just to rely on the music when (re)performing power relations deriving from social structures from the passed centuries on stage, in front of an audience of today? According to McClary (2002), “musical institutions like to claim that music for the most part is not concerned with mundane issues such as gender or sexuality” (p. 9). As I see it, this statement is confirmed in an interview on Swedish radio with the director of the Royal Opera, Birgitta Svendén. She stated that she wanted to avoid delimiting herself by reflecting on gender issues in her artistic choices, since she did not see it as important to consider this in her work (Lindkvist, 2012).

To rely on quality is perhaps not enough. Lindén (2012) has studied the performances of some of the Swedish theatre and opera scenes between 2004 and 2011, analysing body language as well as interpretations. She concludes that it is very rare to see a performance of female sexuality where the woman has an active subject position, and sees a pattern of unequal power conditions in the performances studied, which cannot be regarded merely as the results of the free choices of artists. The opera singer Maticic (2012) argues that opera is a brutal art, where directors work inspired by a “modern” (writer’s quotes) ideal created in the 1940s. The singers portray artificial images of individuals, and, for example, the unwillingly aroused woman is a sign for stopgap solutions. Löfvendahl (2012) claims that although in Swedish opera women hold the leading positions in the institutions, a sexually oriented male gaze still dominates. Brodrej (2012) follows this line of argument and concludes that many antiquated stories of opera need directors that are conscious, skilled, and interested in creating stories that apply to audiences of today.

To further investigate the relation between work and performance in opera, I would like to address how mimesis and realistic acting can connect to opera performance on stage. Mimesis is a concept that has dominated Western arts through history. Aristotle described mimesis as a way of choosing the actions that, correctly portrayed, show the way to the knowledge of universal values (as cited in Diamond, 1997). Diamond argues that mimesis is instead a political practice that recurs through history, coloured by different attitudes. “But the mimesis of this ‘nature’, in its production and reception, will be fully marked by the political, literary, and gender ideologies [...] and the social context” (viii).

Stage realism is the mimesis of positivism, a mode for production that satisfied the need for knowledge and the production of truth (Diamond, 1997). According to Fischer-Lichte (2008), realistic acting derives from late 18th century German literary theatre, where the aim was to elevate the status of the poet’s text and to decrease the influence of the actors. To express the true meaning of the text, the actor’s body was meant to transform from sensual into semiotic, “into a ‘text’ consisting of signs for the emotions and mental states that build a character” (p. 78). There are some similarities to vocal interpretation and how the role of the musical work in opera and classical music affects the acting on the opera stage. From my experience, and following Hemsley (2007), the initial work during opera projects has a main focus on musical interaction and interpretations of the score, led by a conductor or vocal coach. As a singer, I strive to embody the expressive vocal qualities of the score with my voice in terms of interpreting in expression, sound, dynamics, articulation, and phrasing. After a few weeks, the director takes over the rehearsals, and the ensemble starts working on the staging. Situated acting influenced by realism is often used as a vantage point. The conductor or the vocal coach is present, and the aim for me as a singer is to give priority to the prepared musical interpretation of the composer’s work while acting in the dramatic situation.

Theoretical concepts from literary theory have influenced the perception of work and text in other fields, such as cultural studies. In literature the roles of the work and the author have changed during the last decades, due to interdisciplinary findings. The work in literature was earlier conceived as a fragment of substance, a general sign, or an object to be consumed, while read and interpreted through an inner, passive mimesis (Barthes, 1977). In “From work to text” (1977), Barthes describes an epistemological slide in the conception of the work. The authority of the author as a father and owner of the text to whom we should pay respect diminishes. Thus, the work is decanted by the text “from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice“ (p. 162). The text is a signifier, a methodological field, or a social space, that should be seen as the deferred action

of meaning. It “is structured but off-centered, without closure” (p. 159) and filled with traces of other anonymous texts, “woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages [...]” (p. 160).

Kristeva (1992) explains her concept intertextuality as the transposition from one sign system to another. Every signifying practice is polysemic and creates a field for transpositions of different sign systems, an “inter-textuality” (p. 308). At first intertextuality was used by poststructuralists in their aim to subvert implied concepts of objective and stable meaning (Allen, 2011). Literary as well as non-literary texts were claimed to lack independent meaning, as they were constructed on existing systems with traditions and codes from earlier literature. Middleton (2000) states that an intertextual relation where a text refers to other texts, “pushes against the tendential self-sufficiency of works” (p. 61). This relates to how I perceive the role of the opera improvisation as related to opera. Opera improvisation as a practice can be seen as an intertextual and interperformative play (Wilén, in press), where new words, actions and music are created in live improvisation following – and challenging – certain (idiomatic) discourses of different classical music styles that we have learnt from repertoire performance.

From work to performance, to deconstruction in practice

If we were to turn the roles over in opera repertoire, would we then see the voice *Fächer* and power relations between men and women that we may consider as natural, as constructed relations or discourses instead? And what would happen with our relations to operas as musical works? In his “de-construction of the transcendental signified” Derrida criticizes the idea of logocentrism and metaphysics of presence (Derrida, 1997, p. 49). It is therefore perhaps not surprising that he names the theatre as undermined and corrupted by the evil of representation (Derrida, 1997). Derrida mentions two kinds of public persons: the actor and the orator (or the preacher). He compares the actor to an alphabetical letter that does not signify anything in itself or take any ethical responsibility for what is said on stage. “He hardly lives, he lends his voice” born as he is “out of the rift between the representer and the represented” (p. 305). The orator, on the other hand, represents himself, and the representer and the represented are the same. According to Dyndahl (2008), deconstruction is an approach to perceiving the complexity and contingency of the world through exposing things that can have been left out or ignored in what occurs as complete and rational. Deconstruction in music education deals with aesthetic dimensions and insights, and therefore can be used to question “the metaphysical, transcendental notion of a work of art” (Dyndahl, 2008, p. 141).

Culler (2007) mentions Butler's concept of performativity, relating to Derrida and Foucault, as the most important feminist method of deconstruction.

In ON, we chose a number of dramatic situations from the opera repertoire, in order to go through and analyze the material from a performative perspective. We decided on choosing mainly duet scenes from operas with the aim of investigating the interplay between two characters. Preparations started with individual studies of the repertoire, where the singers learnt all the parts in the scenes, in combination with literary studies from a list that I had prepared for the ensemble. For the project we employed an opera director, Elisabet Ljungar, who is also a classically trained violinist. This was important, since the project aimed to investigate opera material from a performative perspective in musical as well as dramatic performance techniques. In the history of opera, cross-dressing is to some extent an established practice, both as written into the scores and in the operatic practice. Breeches roles, where male parts are written for women, occur in operas from different eras. Opera seria roles composed for male castrato singers in the 18th century today are often performed by women. However, from my experience it is not common to cross-cast, or change parts between male and female voices in opera other than in cases related to the ones mentioned above.

During the rehearsals, we combined techniques of improvisation with interpretation working with questions such as: how are gender and power performed in our voices and bodies? What do the characters want to achieve in the situations? What actions do they take? How do we as different singers act in the same part? Changing roles, we did not only face the challenge of having to know how to perform a scene from the different perspectives of the characters. Changing parts also confronted us with the crossing of borders in opera interpretation in a way that went beyond almost everything we have learnt as classical singers. This was an issue that not only concerned the gender question, but also the vocal identity, or *Fach* identity when changing from, for instance, soprano to mezzo-soprano, or from baritone to tenor. Making this choice was a statement in itself, where we challenged the opera as a musical work to be interpreted according to certain, naturalized rules. An opera improviser in an improvisation oscillates between different perspectives as she interacts in parallel or clashing discourses on different levels, such as rhetorical situation, fictive situation on stage, and as a singer in musical action (Wilén, in press). To me, this insight was a very helpful tool in the new ways of interpreting as well as improvising within and relating to repertoire scenes from different subject positions.

In theatre performances (as art events), the performer's actions as well as the materiality of her body can focus and challenge the limits between actor and spectator, or active and passive (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). Fischer-Lichte delineates different performance strategies to achieve this, for example cross-casting and reversing the relationship between the role and the performer. Subject and object are changed into oscillating relations. This in turn makes performance a process rather than an object, thereby questioning the division of the creation of art into production, work, and reception (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). Following this, I see the meeting and creating of opera improvisations in dialogue with the audience as questioning the traditions and structures of operatic performance and musical works. Below I will illustrate how we in this project mixed interpretation and improvisation, with the aim of deconstructing operatic performance. A theoretical discussion will be included in the descriptions.

Remixing power and realism: Tosca and Scarpia

To investigate power relations and positions in operatic performance, we chose a scene between Tosca and Scarpia in Puccini's opera *Tosca* (2008) from 1900. It takes place in Rome in 1800. The second act is situated in Scarpia's office, Palazzo Farnese. The famous singer Tosca (spinto, or lyric dramatic soprano) implores the head of the police, Scarpia (baritone) to release her lover, Mario (lyrical tenor), who is held in arrest and tortured. Scarpia offers to release Mario if she agrees on being intimate with Scarpia, which she refuses. In our reading, the main strategy of both characters is to negotiate, as they both struggle to execute different kinds of power over the other. Tosca's vocal part has a broad spectrum: she begs in a lyrical voice and later dramatically refuses Scarpia. From the ensemble's experience Scarpia is almost always portrayed as a man of stable power. The part is often sung with full a baritone voice, with a constant high status, which makes him seemingly static and impossible to influence. We decided to try to destabilize Scarpia, thereby opening up the scene for a play of power between him and Tosca. All singers studied and repeated the scene in both roles.

In Vadstena, we decided to invite the audience into creating the scenic space. One singer introduced the dramatic circumstances and asked the audience for details for the scene, in terms of time of day, colours and furniture of the room, and what food Scarpia was eating. The situation was then enacted between two singers, in a realistic style, with a fourth wall to the audience. A big difference from realistic acting, though, was that any one of the singers could enter the scene to "tag out" one of the performing singers, and take over the role. The scene was about eight minutes long,

and during this time different kinds of cross-casting and “cross-voicing” occurred in a fluent way, due to the improvisational tagging-out technique. In Vadstena, every singer was free to choose, that is, improvise, her or his own intentions, goals and actions in the moment, as long as s/he followed the written music and text. Near the end of the scene, we stopped the scene and invited the audience to decide how it would end, preferably not as in the original opera. Given this new information from the audience, we continued improvising within the Puccini score for some more minutes, and then slid over to improvisation.

According to Foucault (2009) power is a dense web, a “multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization” (p. 313). Rather than a structure or an institution, it is a result of an unstable strategic situation, filled with complexity, due to the society at hand, and “produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another” (ibid). He describes exercise of power as “a set of actions on possible actions” (Foucault, 2001, p. 341) that is executed by some upon others, using consent and threat of violence as instruments. A relationship of power must be articulated in two elements. First, the person over whom power is executed is acknowledged as a subject who acts, and second, s/he who is faced with a power relationship may open up a field of reactions, responses and other strategies. Foucault stresses that power relations can change at all times, as the result of both conscious and unconscious actions (Nilsson, 2008).

The singers’ individual freedom to choose strategies and goals when entering the scene may have been hard to notice for the audience. To us as singers this improvisational technique combined with the written parts gave us a freedom to play, act, and react upon each other’s actions, in order to achieve and execute power. Since the end was open, and who would “win” was uncertain, our actions during the written parts were important to give the audience a hint of an idea for the ending. When we were given the ending, we had to perform it, but we had to make our way there, while still defending the choices and goals of our characters. This gave the improvisation a slower tempo than usual, which I perceive as positive. The music in the end was improvised, but inspired by Puccini’s music, and the dramatic situation related to the previous scene. This can be seen as an intertextual relation between a written and an improvised scene.

Dyndahl (2005) describes traditional remix as an alternative panning, or changes in relations between background and foreground on a track, through the processing or changing of sounds in a sound image. There are a variety of methods, from reconfigured relations between tracks in a recording, to more thorough changes,

exclusions or additions of tracks or other elements (Dyndahl). According to Middleton (2000) the remix culture can be seen as “the final nail in the coffin of work-thinking” (p. 62).

In our performance, Scarpia could be a fairly short soprano at one moment and a very tall baritone in the next, while Tosca was a tenor or a mezzo-soprano of average height. If we choose to perceive the performing bodies, sounds, and actions of the singers as different tracks, the result was a constantly shifting flow of readings on different levels, where the subject positions of the two characters changed, or were remixed. This may also be related to Derrida’s view of representation in the theatre (see above, p. 305). One signifier (here: Scarpia) could denote several signifieds (here: singers) and have many meanings, the connection is thus destabilized (Dyndahl, 2008). Derrida (2001) describes language as an infinite play with signs and significations within discourses, a structure, or a centreless field (due to that there is no central signified of absolute, transcendent meaning). The differing voices and bodies of Tosca and Scarpia can also be seen as a play, a way of investigating discourses of power. The different singers with different voices, bodies, and sexes perform power through different strategies. The same relation was embodied in different shapes, as a deconstruction of mimetic realistic acting and discourses of power connected to the voice colour and vocal range in opera performance.

Cross-casting and parody in the Carmen play

Carmen (2003), written in 1875, is one of the most famous Western operas. It is performed in different settings several times a year in Sweden alone. According to McClary (2002), Don José is the central character, represented by a musical discourse that impersonates the transcendental universality of Western classical music. Carmen is portrayed as the exotic Other, teasing Don José, as an anima more than a realistically portrayed person, in a music based on dances, characterized by chromatic excesses, and teasing and taunting melodies: “before she even begins to sing, her instrumental vamp sets a pattern that engages the lower body, demanding hip swings in response” (p. 57).

The Seguidilla scene in the first act is a dramatic point that is vital to the story, as the characters meet each other in private for the first time. During the rehearsals, we started in realistic performing and took turns in singing the roles. The switches between singing and watching gave us opportunities to compare how different singers expressed actions and feelings in the voices and bodies, and what strategies we used. During the work we asked ourselves: What is the most interesting to see?

Should we do drag, where a woman acts as a male character in Don José? Or should she act as a female officer, “Donna Josita”? To sing parts that are written for another voice *Fach* was a challenge, which to me became almost more important than the cross-casting. Carmen is a mezzo-soprano role where much of the part lies in the fourth octave. In spite of being a high soprano I would gladly sing these notes, but the timbre of my voice is lighter, which gives another impression. The Spanish dance character of the music, with a playful, elegant touch, and the passionate, seductive character that is so connected to this role is also very rare for me as a soprano to perform. Don José is a dramatic tenor part, which has about the same tessitura as a lower soprano, although with a more dense and dramatic texture of the vocal lines. This was harder to sing, mostly due to the fact that his lines are shorter, and in the form of very dramatic outbursts.

We worked on different ways of merging improvisational techniques into the scene. During the rehearsals we used “improvisational bubbles” that were included at any point where one of the singers had become aware of her/his unaware slipping in status. In the bubble the singer worked his/her way back again. One notion is that every new aspect or technique, such as the change of subject position or *Fach*, to us seemed rich with possibilities in the beginning. After having worked on it for sometime, it got too familiar, and we were somehow set back again. After having investigated how to enact the scene with a realistic perspective in a number of ways, we were puzzled. As I see it, we were searching for the feeling of something unknown and open to widen our perception that I realize is a vital part of opera improvisation.

In theatre and opera, the issues of action and character are central. In some realistic (theatre) acting, the action is used as a vantage point, whereas the character emerges as the result of the actions. The actor then does not strive to play or impersonate character traits, but decides on actions and goals, that s/he persecutes. In opera, character acting more than action acting is common (although it can affect the dramatic qualities of the performance negatively). This can be due to a number of factors, for instance sometimes a slower tempo in opera as drama, as well as the emotions expressed in the music.

We finally decided to go another way: to choose parody, to exaggerate and play with all the notions of “bad acting” in opera that we could come up with. This was probably a way of mirroring our own images of and expectations concerning these two characters, that are among the most played and famous in opera literature. One of the singers hosted the game, and introduced the dramatic situation with an ironic touch, exaggerating the exotic traits of Spain, Carmen’s passionate bodily behaviour

and the troubled manhood of Don José, a silent man with a violent past. The audience was asked to suggest two character traits for each role that stressed these stereotypes. If one of the singers should break the agreement made with the audience, by not featuring the traits given ahead clearly enough in the scene, anyone in the room could stop the play by calling out “Olé!” The singer gave thanks for the criticism with a smile, and was exchanged by another singer, who hopefully could do it better.

According to Hall (1996) identity is articulated inside discourse, in the suture between inner and outer perspectives. As I see it, the goal with Carmen was to create a play with the audience about the singer’s impossible mission in performing a coherent identity of a character while embodying several clashing discourses. The singer had to be fully present in the serious fictive situation, while performing the music according to the score with a free vocal technique, as well as embodying stereotypical physical traits, in order not to be caught by the audience and replaced. The wild goose chase became hilarious to both singers and audience.

Hutcheon (2000) holds that parody can include all kinds of repetition with critical distance. It can be used in problematizing values of the representational process. In music parody can occur as a means of commenting on itself from within. Humour is often, although not always, included. Referring to Butler, Malmio (2007) describes parody as an efficient performative weapon, since it can imitate the language of power, writing itself into the discourses of power as a virus programme, while showing the unnatural ways that power masks itself as “true” and “real” (p. 74, my translation).

In the Carmen play we worked on satirizing the stereotype images of women and men in opera. This goes for the change between different sexes as well as voice *Fächer*. Hutcheon (2000) points to the pragmatic dimension of parody. She holds that the pragmatic function of irony can be seen as signalling valuation. The writer sees parody as mixing similarity and difference, which makes it possible to express contrasting values, such as respect and doubt, at the same time in commenting a work. “This ... mixture of doubling and differentiation, means that parody functions intertextually as irony does intratextually: both echo in order to mark difference rather than similarity.” (p. 64). Using irony as a rhetorical strategy and pending between extramural (from society) and intramural (within a certain genre) strategies can be seen as ways of using satire and parody as deconstructive strategies (Hutcheon, 2000). Hagström-Ståhl (2009) mentions performativity as an artistic strategy that creates a certain effect of distance that can be connected to Brecht’s concept of *Verfremdung* (Brecht, 1975, p. 87). Brecht highly valued the concept of

entertainment in his theatrical work as he conceived of laughter as an important strategy in connecting to the audience and making them reflect on the performance and their own reactions (Järleby, 2009).

The opera improviser's oscillation between different perspectives, such as action perspective within a fictive situation, and rhetorical perspective as an improviser addressing the audience, was to me a very helpful tool in this work. Referring to Derrida (1997), the switching between an entertaining rhetorical situation as in the communicative moment with the audience and the fictive dramatic situation in the Carmen play, can be seen as a way of parodying and deconstructing the relations between the representer in a fictive situation of a play (or opera) and the represented, an orator (or a singer) who performs as herself, as in a rhetorical situation. The traditional role of the audience was also challenged, by making them co-creators. Breaking the frames of realistic acting, the actors and the audience are made aware of the fact that performing a work is a way of performing certain discourses, not expressing authentic values.

In search of oscillating relations

In this project, we aimed to problematize both our singing performance techniques of gender and power in opera, and the performance traditions of opera repertoire. Methods such as cross-casting, cross-voicing, musical and scenic improvisation and opening up for dialogical moments in the fictive situations were used. To create a meeting place between artists and audience in ON also meant creating pathways where the audience would be willing and able to follow us, thereby agreeing on being more or less included in a dialogue. In some scenes, as in the Carmen play, they were free to participate and affect the staging, whereas they were left as spectators behind the imaginative and invisible fourth wall in most parts of the Tosca scene. The role of the audience shifted, from passive spectators to active participants (Fischer-Lichte, 2008), who offered suggestions and affected the actions on stage. This may also affect how they perceive the singers, who oscillate between performing as actors and orators (Derrida, 1997).

ON has given me new experiences on how I can perform with my voice and body on stage, which I hope will influence my artistic choices in the future. Taking on the role as Scarpia or Don José, I interpreted the opera scenes from the male subject position. Enacting these roles means defending their intentions and goals. As soprano I executed actions and power with my voice and body in ways that I earlier have connected to male opera singers and the *Fächer* of baritone and tenor.

Performing as Carmen, I became more aware of how tempting it is for me as a singer to embody a stereotypical image in performing a role, in order to focus on enhancing the vocal performance. This can be seen as deconstructing different discourses of operatic performative practices in terms of roles and subject positions for artists and audience, as well as the voice *Fächer* in opera. To me the oscillation between different perspectives was a helpful tool from opera improvisation that gave way to new perspectives in the repertoire scenes.

I find Barthes' (1977) and Löfvendahl's (2012) notions of consumption connecting to (literary) works and opera respectively very interesting. If operas are perceived as works, or art objects of music, hierarchic structural relations of classical music on different levels may limit the singers' agency in making choices. Stage settings of classical operas where the staging is moved to a contemporary context while the social situations and discourses from the time of the opera remain unchanged and unproblematized could actually reproduce and emphasize hierarchies more than a historical setting would do (Operaimprovisatörerna, 2012).

Consequently, also the musical components of opera, such as the scores and performance practises, need to be approached from different perspectives (Operaimprovisatörerna, 2012). If we choose, inspired by Barthes (1977), to see opera as musical texts, a variety of perspectives open up to other readings and modes of performance. In this way the performers may gain access to more tools to communicate what and how they want to express themselves, rather than mainly focusing on deliverance of the music as works.

This is also important when it comes to vocal education. The performance of music as work is indeed a very rewarding, demanding, and inspiring task that takes a great deal of work. However, when we as singers practise and perform classical singing repertoire as works, during many hours a day for many years, often using tools of the instrumental-technical method, we enter, integrate, and develop historicized discourses into our bodies, often without being aware of it. I believe that a vantage point of classical music as text could give singers greater possibilities in developing as performing artists in music, making their own choices from artistic, societal, and not least musical perspectives to a greater extent, by developing practical-empirical methods.

Opera Nova – power, love, remix, or rather power, gender, remix, is an investigation and a play with different musical and performative processes and traditions in operatic performance. Remixing on the interface between the singing body and sound as materiality can be seen as problematizing the work concept of classical music through practice, or deconstruction from within. A search for oscillating

relations between different perspectives on music and performativity in operatic performance can be seen as turning to a diversity of operatic performative aesthetics.

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Article 3

A kaleidoscope of interactions – researching and presenting processes of opera improvisation

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It might be a bit hard to get all the brains, souls, everything to interplay. And everything that you bring to the gig or the performance, everything is there... But when you dare to bring discomfort and anguish and divorces and just: there you go! And enjoy the fall. That's cool. But it's so scary that you almost die. (F, interview 131101)



Operaimprovisatörerna, Opera Nova - power, love, remix, 2012. Photo: Klara Bodell

The artistic doctoral project *Singing in action – processes of vocal improvisation* is an investigation of vocal improvised performance from my point of view as a classically trained singer and vocal improviser. It focuses on an artistic tradition which has its roots in medieval Provence and Italy (Wilén, 2013a) and which is an expanding classical vocal genre of today: opera and art song improvisation as extemporization, or instant composition, performed by classical singers in dialogue with the listeners. As a forum for classical singers' and musicians' experimental work, it is still fairly uncommon in the field of classical music making today. The aim of the project is to problematize aspects of the role of classical singers in performance. At its centre is my work as a classical vocal improviser in various contexts, such as the Swedish ensembles *Impromans* and *Operaimprovisatörerna*.



Operaimprovisatörerna, Moments of opera, 2010. Photo: Carl Thorborg

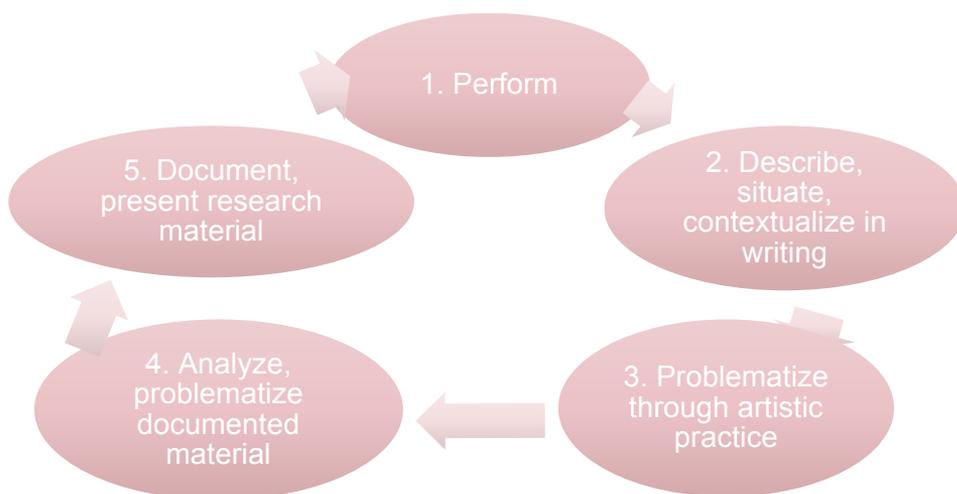
My working research questions are:

- How can I investigate and analyze the creative interaction in emergent improvisations?
- How can I create methods for exploring, documenting and communicating collaborative improvisational processes?

In this text I will describe and discuss how I have investigated these two questions in my work within the ensemble *Operaimprovisatörerna*. The aim is to find ways of communicating insights and knowledge of the improvisational processes, based on the various perspectives of the ensemble members. This led me to conducting interviews with my fellow improvisers. A part is included below, where the interview processes are described and discussed. The interview results in turn led to my development of the the interplay analysis model (IAM), which I argue could be developed into a theoretical tool, with which improvisational processes can be both researched and communicated. I conclude by presenting a session, as an example of how a combination of preliminary interview results and IAM can be used in order to communicate important aspects of the interplay in *Operaimprovisatörerna*.

To analyze and communicate processes of opera improvisation

This research project is designed as an ongoing investigation of the performative space in improvisation, through the documentation and analysis of performances in various contexts. The methods in the project so far can be described as follows:



1. To perform improvisation in various contexts, mostly within the ensembles *Impromans*¹¹³ and *Operaimprovisatörerna*.
2. To describe, situate and contextualize my improvisational practice and performance situation, by writing texts where I reflect on musicodramatic improvisation from perspectives relating to connected fields, such as musical improvisation, cultural studies, opera, rhetorics, theatre and other.
3. To problematize the artistic practice by creating new artistic concepts, formats and techniques¹¹⁴.
4. To analyze and problematize mine and my fellow improvisers' improvisational practice by investigating the filmed and recorded material and conduct analyses seen from our subjective perspectives, partly using qualitative methods.
5. To use an artistic academic approach in order to document, interpret and present the improvisational practice in video, audio, photo, oral presentations, performance papers and written text.

Opera improvisation is a live genre (Wilén 2013a, Wilén 2013b) where musicodramatic material is instantly created with the intention not to be repeated or replayed. The improvisations are created in a specific situational context as a result of the ongoing parallel dialogues in the room. Consequently, objectifying the improvisations by comparing them to the creation of musical scores seems not to be the most accurate method, since the performative situation is inseparable from the situated interactional processes and contextual relations. I have therefore worked on reflecting these performative points of view. During the first years of my research project, I investigated ways of analyzing and problematizing the practice of opera improvisation. At first, I investigated possibilities of studying opera improvisation as written musical texts, or musical scores, or works (for a discussion of work and text, please see Wilén, 2013b). This way of analyzing music has been dominant in musicology for a long period of time. However, in order to do that, I would need to start by making musical transcriptions of the improvisations. This could be seen as

¹¹³The work in *Impromans* also include cooperation with a light designer, where the audio-visual aspects of the performance are in focus, experimenting with new techniques. Here I work with methods inspired by an autoethnographic approach, which will be further described in a publication in 2015.

¹¹⁴For a description of *Opera Nova- power, love, remix*, a performance project focusing gender and power structures in opera repertoire and opera improvisation, see Forsare (2013), *Operaimprovisatörerna* (2012), Wilén, (2013b).

a way of creating musical works out of the improvisations, and I found that it would not give me the information I was looking for.

Instead I tried to capture merely the interactional aspects of improvisation, in a series of analytical etudes in 2010–2011. These focused on aspects of situation, action analysis and rhetorics in the performances. (Wilén, 2013c), as well as intertextuality, interper-formativity (Wilén, 2013a,b) and deconstruction (Wilén, 2013b) in relation to my artistic practice. This has not led much further on the way towards insights in the interplay between the participators of opera improvisation and impromans. In my view, one reason for this is that the concepts I have used emanate from the theoretical framework of textual works or cultural studies, which mainly focus on an interpretative perspective in the former and an outside, viewer's perspective from cultural practices in the latter.

During the last couple of years, my aim has been to investigate methodological approaches and techniques that permit a multi-layered oscillation between emic and etic perspectives (where the emic represents the insider and the etic represents the researcher) as inspired by an ethnographic approach (Bresler, 2006). More importantly, I have searched for ways of integrating and communicating the voices and perspectives of my fellow improvisers into the project. An important part of the insights done in his project so far would have been impossible without my fellow improvisers. Needless to say, in the artistic practice we work together in opera improvisation on more equal terms than in my own, more distanced parts of the research processes. For economical and organizational reasons, it has not been possible to integrate the colleagues fully into the research processes. For this reason, it is of utmost importance for this project to find other ways of creating a dialogue between my own and my colleagues' work and lines of thought in the research.

This has led me in search for new methods of presentation in direct connection with the documented material, as a way of communicating preliminary findings along the way. I see this as a possibility of using the analysis as a result in itself. Mullin (2011) points to the performative character of all art practices and describes rhetorical research as investigating aspects of communication in different fields, asking questions about 'what the nature of the discourse at hand is: what the elements used to declaim, persuade, unmask, affect or praise are' (p. 153). What is done is done for a reason, in artistic research as well as in artistic practice. In my project, this rhetorical perspective is central and connected to questions about the performative aspects of formats for presenting artistic research.

Operaimprovisatörerna (The Opera Improvisers) was founded in 2007 and today consists of seven opera and two pianists. Apart from the work within the ensemble,

the members are freelancing opera singers and musicians who regularly perform also in other repertoire and improvisational contexts. Since the start in 2007 *Operaimprovisatörerna* has made a great number of performances, including its own productions and guest appearances, in venues on theatres, festivals, concert halls as well as schools and in conferences, symposiums and other meetings in organizations within public institutions, business organizations and citizens' associations. The public performances are normally attended by a mixed audience. Young, adults and elderly come to see each performance. Every performance is unique when it comes to dramatic, musical and textual contents, since no material is aimed to be repeated, and the ensemble asks the audience for specific incitements for the scenes.

Below I will describe how the continued work with video analysis led to a new methodological choice: conducting interviews, which included both *Operaimprovisatörerna* and *Impromans*.

Dead ends? Tosca Scarpia scene analyses

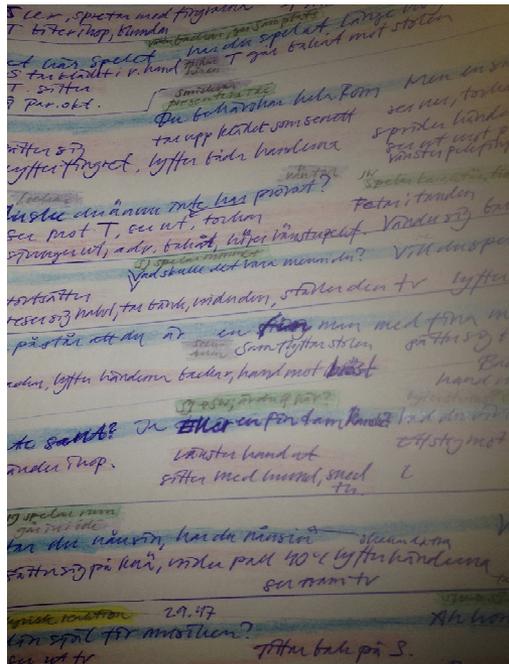
In order to develop my modes of improvisational analysis, I decided to choose a scene from the project *Opera Nova, love, gender, remix, ON* (Wilén, 2013b). This project was an investigation of gender and power on stage in repertoire opera and opera improvisation, where opera repertoire scenes and improvisation were combined in various modes during the performances. I ended up choosing the Tosca Scarpia scene from a performance at *Vadstena Gamla Teater* on July 28th, 2012. Here we begin by performing parts of a scene in the second act of *Tosca* (Puccini, 1900). The singers change roles, by using a tag out system¹¹⁵ as the repertoire scene develops. At a certain point, we stop the performance and ask the audience to suggest a new ending for the scene. Here, it is suggested that Tosca challenges Scarpia in some way. The singers who are on stage in roles as the opera is stopped, continue the scene, and after a while move on into an improvised part. In this version, Tosca is performed by Samuel Jarrick, and I perform Scarpia. Gregor Bergman plays the piano.

¹¹⁵ A technique from improvisational theatre, where the entering improviser takes on a role by tapping the shoulder of another actor on stage, thus asking him/her to leave the stage. Samuel (in blue) tags Linus (in brown) out in this image.



Tosca Scarpia tag out

In a first round of analysis in May 2013, I decided to analyze the scene from perspectives such as text, physical action, vocal action/intention and acting technique. These were drawn as parallel tracks in different colours, with the aim to detect if there were some patterns that occurred between them (Sandberg Jurström, 2009). I found that I didn't have a program that worked for this, so I made the analysis on paper.



Sketch analysis Tosca Scarpia scene

In August I conducted a second round of detailed analysis of the video. This time I analyzed the physical actions, the harmonic context, and the dramaturgical structure. During this work I began to wonder if the chosen aspects actually would cover more than reveal specific aspects of this oral genre, since both dramaturgical and action analysis derive from a literary tradition, focusing mainly on written texts. This led into search for other analytic approaches. As noted above, I have mostly found examples of semiotic studies in music. I was again made aware of the fact that it is the interactive intentions and structures of the improvisers more than the signs of the intentions that I wish to investigate. However, at the time I found no satisfying way to do this. This made me consider interviews with all the opera improvisers (including myself), in order to find some common themes or features in our words about our practice.

A new trail: the interviews

From August to November 2013 I conducted nine interviews with eight out of nine members of the two ensembles *Operaimprovisatörerna* and *Impromans*¹¹⁶. The lengths of the interviews vary between one to two and a half hours, in total about thirteen hours. The work with the interview material was done over a period of four months, including the analysis. In an abductive process of coding and describing the codes I regularly returned to the material in order to retry my choices and change the codes in line with my increasing interpretation and understanding of the indications in the material.

Before the interviews, I had chosen some video clips from performances, which were sent out to the interviewees on beforehand as Youtube links. The films chosen were recorded in 2012 (ON, *Operaimprovisatörerna*) 2011 and 2013 (*Impromans*). I chose scenes where I as well as the interviewee participated. The films were chosen in order to serve as a starting point for discussions and concrete examples, as a kind of stimulated recall sessions. Another aim was to ask the interviewees about their intentions and experiences during the scenes in question, with the goal of collecting different descriptions and perspectives of the courses of events on stage. Haglund (2003) questions what can be said about the interactive thinking of the participants in stimulated recall sessions, since they cannot know for sure whether a thought is created at the event of the interview, or occurred already during the session that was filmed. It is therefore important to communicate whether the study intends to focus primarily on the interactive thinking of the participants, or on their beliefs and

¹¹⁶ In one of these, I was interviewed by Conny Antonov, who is a member of both the ensembles.

knowledge. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, in an open structure (Kvale, 1997) addressing themes and issues such as “what is important to you in an opera improvisation?” or “how do you make/perform opera improvisation”. I also addressed the different perspectives of the singers on stage. There was no time to make detailed joint analyses of the films during the interviews. Instead I took the possibility to meet the improvisers’ images, insights and thoughts on the interplay, often in relation to certain concrete moments in the films. This can be seen as collecting descriptive data: “In all of these situations the interview is used to gather descriptive data in the subject’s own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world.” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 95). Needless to say, these interviews themselves are also performative forums, or discursive practices, where the improvisers might choose what and how they wish to communicate about themselves as artists, and the practice as such.

The major part of the interviews was annotated and/or transcribed in detail. The transcriptions were made in the format of written language, since my aim was to communicate the contents, and not the linguistic aspects of the interviews. In the transcriptions, I found themes that were addressed in the interviews, asking the material: “what is important to X in opera improvisation?” These themes were annotated and later coded in categories, resulting in a total of 376 codes. I went through the codes again and chose the ones dealing with the interactions on stage and the strategies of the improvisers, in total 177 codes. These were organized in three major categories and later divided into subgroups. In May 2014, I presented the interview results and the IAM model to the ensemble, in order to get feedback. Some comments and thoughts from this feedback session are also included below.

Aspects of improvisational interplay – preliminary results of the interviews

In the analysis of the codes of the interview material I have found three main groups of themes:



These themes are not to be viewed as excluding categories, but as complementary parts. There are concepts that overlap each other, and needless to say, they occur in

parallel in the interaction I have chosen to add some quotes from the interviews with the aim of giving thicker descriptions. As noted above, my pre understanding will affect the descriptions.

It is important to note that the codes are based on what the improvisers say during the interviews. Of course, this is not all there is to say about opera improvisation, since in the ensembles we often do not say things that are obvious in the context. There are many agreements and technical set ups for different games and scenes that are not mentioned here at all. On the one hand, my role as an insider in the practice gives me some advantages when it comes to interpreting the material, as I know the participants well. On the other hand, the interview situation and what is said is affected by our personal and professional relationships, as well as by my preunderstanding of the work within the groups. As a consequence of this I have chosen the codes that I find relevant for the final round of analyses, with less regard of how often they occur in the material.

I have chosen to anonymize the interviewees in this section, by giving them letters from A to I. These are randomly chosen and have no relation to the improviser's names. Since there is a limited amount of participants in the study, I have also chosen to leave out information about the gender and instrument of the improvisers, in order to diminish the chance of pointing out who says what. This is done for ethical reasons, since the improvisers at points comment on each other. Anonymizing the improvisers creates the possibility of analyzing and using parts where colleagues criticize each other. This in turn gives the result richer qualities, since it points to a variety of views and experiences within the material. In the descriptions of the Tosca Scarpia scene the names are not left out, since the improvisers comment on the specific films where they appear themselves. The participants have left their consent to the various uses of the quotes on email.

My intention with this section is to give a rich image of aspects of interplay in opera improvisation, and how the interplay web is woven from several unique communicational threads, emerging between all the improvisers on stage at the same time. I have chosen not to distinguish between comments on the interplay of the films and descriptions of inner experiences of the improvisers, since in many cases these overlap. It is also important to note that the improvisers often shift between describing their interactions as characters within the fictive scenic context, and as improvisers on stage, within the same comment.

1) Here and now: interacting within a situation

The opera improvisers address perspectives, experiences and strategies on interaction during the improvisations. Important issues in this subgroup are to remain in the present moment, to be together, act earnest, share uncertainty, and to work with and go with the flow of energy. In the May feedback session, some improvisers mean that one way of being together in the moment, is to accept the offers of the other, and also see a need not to accept at points, in order to create more contrasts.

In the now

All the improvisers stress the importance of being together in the present moment. To B being in the moment is more important than keeping track of the details of the emerging story. S/he emphasizes the importance of working with the energy levels, where a common platform in terms of a focal point in the situation can provide energy, which can be used in the play.

No I, would say that in general I think quite little... And it happens quite often that I have really forgotten where we are going (laughs). No, in general I am more based on being in the present, in the emotions and what happens right now. Therefore I think it's important to have stations, or landings in the flow.

F stresses cooperation and flow of the interplay in the moment as the core of opera improvisation.

What I'm really passionate about, or when I enjoy it the most is when we find a flow together as fellow players. And you don't even have to be on stage, you can stand on the side and see that, well, bang, bang, bang, and a fantastic duet. What a setup, I'll take it, wonderful! Oh, I 'm so lonely, or whatever. I have a wonderful reason to sing a song. It might be a bit hard to get all the brains, souls, everything to interplay. And everything that you bring to the gig or the performance, everything is there. So of course perfect harmony is really hard to achieve. But when to dare to bring discomfort and anguish and divorces and just: there you go! And enjoy the fall. That's cool. But it's so scary that you almost die.

D describes how a feeling of flow in both music and movement patterns occurs in a scene.

There is a movement pattern when we make these duets. There is nothing that is decided or anything, and it's all improvised... If I see that you go there I go this way, and if I sit down on a chair you come and hold this son from the back, hugs him. And there is a kind of flow... it's not like if I sit down on a chair you look like a question mark... it just happens, it becomes like a flow that just occurs. And it's the same thing with the musical part. That's what I find the best. And at times this happens in the whole group, that you feel that, it's obvious that the next scene must be like this. Then that person needs to go in.

Banding, taking turns

In the interaction improvisers sometimes use different attitudes, or modes in the dialogue. Central issues of these categories are giving and accepting offers, timing, keeping agreements, listening, reacting and confirming the others as improvisers. To some singers, the piano plays an important role in setting the dramatic approach and tempo in a scene.

A describes how s/he takes in another improviser.

Sometimes I just hear ¹¹⁷ and then I can hear words, or where you are going in the text. Then I can see where you are in the room, if the room changes for instance. If the emotion changes I can see this since you show it clearly with your body language, and of course also with your way of using the voice and the eyes.

D notes the importance of giving priority to being within the situation and the agreements in the context. This is also connected to clear offers to the colleagues on stage. S/he refers to a scene when s/he wasn't sure if the colleague was in the scene or not, due to the placing on stage. S/he underlines the importance of being clear in how you communicate if you're on or off stage.

You can't be unclear about: am I offstage or am I onstage? Am I in this scene or not? You have to make up your mind about that. If you don't know exactly what to do when you come in, might not be a problem, because you can surprise even yourself in those cases. But I have to decide if I, in fact, am there.

Several of the improvisers note that the piano often has an important role in giving impulses on the approach and dramatic development in a scene. G points to the fact that in score music, repertoire singers are used to react to the music, and reflects on

¹¹⁷ A refers to when s/he doesn't see the other improviser at all, but only hears the voice.

how often this happens in opera improvisation as well. S/he reflects on how the function of the music would alter if the singer would make different choices.

It could be really interesting if you didn't pick it up, but let it be like a hidden tension. If I have a poker face here, then the music works here. And then we could interpret it as something that is happening inside of me, or not, it might be something that happens in you.

In the May session, several of the improvisers agreed on this point of view, claiming the need not to accept and join initiatives so fast, but to maintain and create friction and contrasts for each other, in order to develop the improvisations.

Distance

Some of the improvisers point to that it's sometimes hard to remain totally present within the fictive situation. This can be due to different reasons. It can be related to the fact that we as opera improvisers make your own dramatic choices. There is no outer eye, or director, who makes a reading and takes responsibility for what is acted out on stage.

F thinks that the relations between opera improvisers are closer than compared to opera repertoire colleagues.

We shouldn't be afraid of letting it get serious, sincere and really, really mean something, and not to have, what are they called, quotation marks? But to feel grounded. I think that's almost the hardest thing, to really be grounded and not, just fluff on top of everything. Well, fluff, that's some kind of quick fix, or escape in scenes where you feel that you adapt too much, or you don't dare to break, or defend your character.

D notes that s/he is distanced in one scene, and reflects upon the interactional consequences between the improvisers, by describing how s/he reacts on distance as a fellow player.

I see that I don't quite know what to do in the situation, so I start to act with some quotation marks, or at least confusion, which is nor in favour for the story, neither for someone else. As soon as someone starts to do that I feel that either you have to fight it very hard as fellow player... If I take a story really seriously and want to play it, and someone else plays with quotation marks... I feel a bit dorky and stupid, that I take this seriously, when the other person doesn't, or I get mad.

In the May session, notes were made that it is important that we as improvisers dare to remain present in the situation within this uncertainty, and not create new material in order to be safe, or entertaining.

2) Expectations and contrasts

Using and relating to expectations and conventions in performative situations, roles and structures

The opera improvisers describe different ways of addressing and playing with contents, shared connotations and idiomatic features, often by using intertextual and/or interperformative strategies (Wilén 2013a, Wilén 2013b) in the situation and context at hand. This is also related to the expectations of the performance situation, both from the audience and the improvisers themselves. Contrast is often created by breaking, or turning a certain direction in, or aspect of the scene by going against it, often with humor. E describes a performance where s/he made a solo that was intended as serious, but met an unexpected reaction from the audience.

You can make an analogy, of metaphor: you enter, and the audience sees who you are and what you are. Your sex, your size, your whatever. Then they immediately hold a suit up, schscht! Here, these suits are the ones you get to choose from. Here's the funny suit... you're a man, here's a power suit, here's your... this is what's offered. It's an offer from the audience. To jump into one of these suits... is easy, because they are ready. It's you who makes the choice, as an actor. But to choose something else takes that you have a referential frame. So you can say; no, I brought my own suit, here's how I look. And then they can become a little confused. Perhaps this takes more courage as an actor, to dare to stand up for it...

F talks about improvisation as a genre that has many possibilities in playing with expectations, and turn situations on stage. S/he also sees opera improvisation as a genre that can mock traditional opera characters and opera as genre.

To be able to mock it completely, both sort of fuck off to the genre, but at the same time in a loving way. Not in a bad way, but loving and sincere. That it can be sort of, totally still and very beautiful, romantic and earnest, but it can also be: haha, gotcha! It can also be the other way around... partly in relation to the audience, but partly in relation to ourselves, that we aren't scared to break it when it is as most beautiful...

According to G, it is common to play with opera as genre in the improvisations. S/he describes opera as closer to a kind of ancient drama that has no purpose of being realistic.

It takes energy to sing, and when the energy isn't in the language or in the situation something clashes. Sometimes when we play with genres I experience that we in Operaimprovisatörerna play with the notion that a certain situation really isn't fit for singing. We create a dramatic setup by charging it so that we can be motivated to sing a Wagner phrase. It takes something to go in and use the big expression, and we play a little with that.

F compares the work with characters and at some points clichés in the work in repertoire to opera improvisation, and notes that there are similarities to how s/he works in opera improvisation sometimes. To F clichés can provide useful tools in the work, both for good and bad.

Now we have worked for so long that you have sort of backups with old geezers and ideas that you can sort of upload. In my brain I think that there are ready setups... and there's nothing wrong with having such a backup to be able to carry things through. But it's not at those points that the most exciting things happen I think.

3) Setting, sharing and developing common structures, ideas and models

This theme focuses how the use of common structures and ideas are practiced in the choices of the improvisers. This regards both structures for narrative and interactional levels, as well as relation to conventions and traditions in Western opera and storytelling.

Tell a story together

In a longer opera improvisation, the focus is often on creating a story in a series of differing scenes, in terms of an emergent dramaturgy which is often related to Western storytelling. In the interviews many of the improvisers note the importance of having a common direction, where themes and offers are taken into account and developed. It is common to enter the stage with a clear idea and offers to the other improvisers about how the scene and/or story can proceed. Here it is of great importance to be aware of the things that have occurred on stage, so that these can be integrated and referred to in the plot line. It can also be a matter of sharing a focus of what's important in a scene, which in turn form a common, although

unknown flow interfoliated with certain ledges, or stations, where the improvisers share the same focus. One important experience from the May session was that the improvisers also interpret meaning of the occurred events in retrospective, in a sort of reactive creativity, in order to maintain and develop the emerging improvisation. D emphasizes that humorous effects sometimes emerge when the improvisers act stick to the story and act within the agreed situations and characters, instead of creating distance in different ways. This was also confirmed in discussions during the May session.

H underlines the importance of presenting things on stage with the aim to give them relevance in the ongoing drama.

So, my thing is that everything we place on stage must have a meaning, or we might as well take it out. And as improvisers we need to learn to take these things in, and take care of them. All the things we say, all the things we do in space work... the offers that are made need to be taken care of. And if we can't take in all the offers today, we need to take them down a bit, so that we can play on the level where we are right now, especially when we go out and perform in front of an audience.

C notes that a clear inner conception of the story at points risk to delimit the improviser from taking in new offers from the fellow improvisers.

Sometimes I think that when you have a too strong image of where we are going, you risk not to be really open for other offers... It leads to that you don't just throw anything out there, but it could also lead to that you become a bit limited in actually perceiving the others' parallel thoughts about where we are going...

Clear structural choices in situations

In many opera improvisations the situated acting (see above) is part of the performing techniques. In order to create a coherence in the situation and story fast, it is common to make clear scenic choices regarding both the improviser's own character and in relation to other characters and improvisers. F emphasizes that there are points in opera improvisation where a singer doesn't have to be clear about the circumstances for his or her role. But in order to continue a longer form, it's important to do this. It can be someone else in the ensemble, who comes in and gives an offer, and thereby shares the responsibility for the story.

But then, just because I was angry and sang a quick and rough aria... Then it might really show that one hasn't responded those questions: who am I, where do I want to go, where am I going? And then it could really be a relief to leave, or that someone comes in and says: well, Sven, now you're standing here. You've been left behind. Or, why did you burn the lumber mill down? Thank you, it's really nice that someone comes in and tells me that I've done that. Because this shared responsibility can create space and freedom.

Taking dramatic, musical and operatic structures as vantage point

In the work, we often use tonal languages and styles both for the music and stage performance, which are inspired by Western opera and art music and opera and occasionally other genres. D describes how knowledge from opera repertoire is used as an asset in the work, and notes that the ensemble could use this knowledge more in order to develop opera improvisation further as an independent art form.

A describes how the common knowledge is used in the musical interplay.

If you make a cadence in something quasi romantic, you can sort of feel that, plamplam, then some-thing new starts. Then there is a sort of culture that we have in common and relate to. We know that, it will be approximately this long...

In the May session, several comments were made on how a joint musical vantage point could create a framework where a slower interactional development could take place, in order to deepen the contents by creating a musical structure.

Analyzing and pruning the improvisations

For some improvisers it is important to see the improvisations from a distanced perspective, as with an outer eye. In these cases a clear structure often emanating from a text genre, such as opera or film, is the goal in the emergent scenes and stories. H says:

I think that when we are unsure as improvisers, many of us create a lot of text in order to find a frame, since as improvisers we feel safe in a frame... if you look at written opera, and compare it also to film, it is a material that has been elaborated. There the text and everything that is said has been analyzed. Everything you say is important, and you just leave out the things that are insignificant. You have time to erase these things, and really just say the things that lead the action forward, and this is what we need to learn, I think.

Known paths

In opera improvisation we often take given frameworks, circumstances or agreements as vantage points. These are often set in dialogue with the audience (although the ensembles use techniques or games which are not communicated in detail), and can create a safety frame in the situations on stage. Within the ensemble there are contradictory images on the importance of traditional and known choices on different levels. Some of the improvisers note the role of convention and traditional choices, mostly from opera repertoire performance, as a way of enhancing the quality or creativity, while some see this as delimiting in the work. S/he hopes to challenge conventional roles these structures more in the future, and points to frames such as convention as a possible prerequisite for creativity.

Often it's not that hard to come up with the ideas... the hard thing can be to choose which ideas to use, to make the choices. Then it can be quite nice with a limited space. It challenges the creativity to find as much freedom as possible within this limited space. That can be a quite nice way to work.

While commenting on a scene that is based on movement and a more dissolved format, F on the other hand is very positive about how movement as vantage point contradicts the ensemble's common choice of a linear, narrative framework, which often affects the singers to into choosing to act within a realistic setting.

Why is it that opera is about having static arms and legs that move as you think it should be.... But I guess it depends on how we interpret the unwritten work... Instead we could use the body as vantage point, the moving body as an element, also in the story. And we do, sometimes. It can be a machine or inspired by a collage, or the form I am. Of course we often use our bodies, but from my experience it's very seldom that we do when we have started to tell a story. Then we are the father, or the mechanic, or, the roles, the boss, the mother.

Creativity

In opera improvisation, ideas and actions occur in a constant flow, and the improvisers are put in unexpected situations, where the circumstances have suddenly changed. Some of the improvisers describe their views on the importance of making openings for new ideas and images from within as well as from each other. It can also be about presenting ideas for the contents or techniques on stage in the moment, using personal experiences as material, making rhymes in the moment, or solving unexpected problems such as changed circumstances in the scene, due to

actions of the fellow improvisers. C notes that the relation to association and the unexpected is often a priority during the first part of the rehearsals.

I think that when we make improvisation exercises, it is the crazy, the associative, the sort of... non-dramaturgical, which is the core of our improvisations... without any storyline or logic at all.

C underlines the importance of keeping this aspect also in the longer opera improvisation forms on stage.

That is, to listen and to think about the action, but that there is a possibility not to know, and to end up in: what is this?

E gives examples of how some colleagues deliver things that are unexpected in the situation, such as poetic solos, or a new set up which changes the circumstances, in the middle of a story.

Interplay analysis

During the groupings of the codes from the interviews, I became aware of similarities between the three main themes and Nettelbladt's (2013) pragmatic model (see below) for pragmatic description and analysis. When I conceived this, I chose to put the interview themes in the same order, to make the similarities more evident.

The concept pragmatics derives from Charles Sanders Peirce, who developed the semiotic model¹¹⁸. Pragmatics deals with the relationship between users and symbols, and the processes during which language is created (Nettelbladt, 2013). This concept was further developed by Charles Morris, who divided human language into three areas: syntax (dealing with the relation between linguistic symbols), semiotics (dealing with the relation between a symbol and its contents) and pragmatics, which focuses the relation between symbols and the users themselves (ibid). Today pragmatics is mostly used in the field of language philosophy and linguistics, where it addresses knowledge on how we use language, and how interpretations of an utterance depend on the context or situation (Nettelbladt, 2013). According to

¹¹⁸ In Peirce's system, index indicates that an utterance in some way is close to the content in space or time. An icon is a sign that shows similarities to the content it signifies, such as a train on a traffic sign, or gestures that illustrate something. Symbols are signs, which have a conventionalized, sometimes arbitrary relation to their signified content (Nettelbladt, 2013).

Nettelbladt, pragmatic understanding addresses how you perceive a situation, and to say something relevant in relation to what you think it's about, what has been done and along with your own and other's actions in the situation (p. 384). Central to the pragmatic understanding is the relations between the parts and the whole, or the local and the global aspects of understanding, which always need to be interrelated. The four dimensions of the model (p. 376) are:

1) *Interaction*

Nettelbladt (2013) describes the interaction as the core of the dialogic interaction, which deals with turn taking and timing.

2) *The relation between the said and the intended contents*

This dimension regards aspects of the fact that humans often intend or mean more than they say outspokenly. It also deals with issues of context, since a working language needs to provide tools for new situations. The use of idiomatic expressions, humor, and images in languages are all included in this dimension, as well as aspects of action in relation to language.

3) *Sequentiality in conversations, and textual coherence*

This dimension takes textual aspects into account, in terms of how a conversation is created as a sequel of different parts. Issues of memory and coherence are important here.

4) *Adaptation to an overarching activity or type of activity*

Nettelbladt describes the fourth dimension as dealing with the context of the conversation, and the overarching situation.

This encouraged me to finally try the codes as vantage points for analyses of the improvisational interplay on some of the films that were discussed during the interviews. This preliminary analytic model is based and used here on the notion that the codes annotate which communicative mode that I perceive as dominating in the improvisational interplay at different points. Some codes, especially in the Tosca Scarpia scene, are based on the concrete notions of the interplay made by my fellow improvisers during the interviews. It is not possible to know what intentions all the improvisers have during these improvisations. In order to access the ideas of the improvisers I would need to analyze the films together with the fellow improvisers, using the codes. Even so, many of the aspects that regard intuitive choices of course would not be possible to track, even for us as improvisers. For this reason, I focus mainly on the aspects of interplay that I perceived in the film analyses. As noted above, I found striking similarities between the three main thematic groups in the interview study and aspects of Nettebladt's suggested model.

Indeed, such similarities between data and theory are not enough to motivate a certain research perspective (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008). The preliminary findings indicate that an analytic model such as this could be of use when approaching musico-dramatic interaction, where music, movement, drama and words, are interrelated. However, in order to develop a working model, more work would need to be done.

As above, the thematic groups will appear as coloured boxes in the film, where the code is described, beside the improvisers:



When watching these examples, there is a possibility to stop the film and read the labels in detail on the still image, There is also a possibility just to watch the film, in order to get an image of how the communication flows in the emerging interplay, from the improviser's perspective.



Tosca Scarpia boxes

Interplay analysis - Space station

Here is an example from the beginning of a long form in opera improvisation, performed at ON in Vadstena 2012. One of the opera improvisers, Samuel Jarrick, creates a platform together with the audience, by choosing a place. We have agreed to start this long form with the technique “I am”, where the improvisers go in and make individual solos, creating and performing a place. Then a tutti part follows. Since this technique mainly deals with musical and text interaction, I have chosen to focus the sounding interaction here.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfFKSGWnOwA>

A kaleidoscope interplay session: The Tosca Scarpia scene

1) *Watch the film below.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4MAB1GSgTo>

Read the following conversations related to this scene.

Clear physical offers

Gregor describes how Samuel and I as singers in this scene, help each other out in doing the things on stage that work well.

Gregor: It's very nice for me when Samuel holds up his finger. Because it is like he is signaling that, now I am going to tell something. It becomes very clear in the sense that, here comes something. It is almost as raising the hand: Miss, I have to say something. It comes as very clear physical body language. And then I am like: ok, let's see, now I will help to transmit your message.

Sara: Right. And when you play, you mostly watch the stage?

Gregor: Yes, that's right. I don't know to what extent I look down... no, I almost never look down. No, I try to be there all the time, so that I hopefully can see...

A little later, Samuel gives clear offers to Gregor and me about what is central on stage, and in the story. In the fictive context, Samuel as Tosca invites Scarpia (me) to play on the spinet. He does this by directing his body, voice and gaze against a

low, green, wooden bench. Thereby he both addresses it as an instrument, a spinet, and brings it in focus. Gregor describes that Samuel's action affects him into turning the harmony into a mediant.

He physically and scenically charges the piano, or the spinet, as it is to become. He stands a little bit away from it and gives it a: (breathes in) here it is. To me it is wonderful with all those kinds of things, where there is a clarity in the body language. The interesting thing is that I don't have to know... I mean, when he holds his finger up, I don't really know where he is going... He might do a turn in that moment, but it doesn't really matter in that situation. Because it is a possibility to meet anyway... at least I know that now he is going to tell something important, or now he is charging for the use of or the meeting with that item. It gives me so much in his intention, as compared to if he had only been walking around or singing.

*Gender and clichés*¹¹⁹

As noted before the project ON we also worked with changing roles in repertoire scenes such as the one preceding this improvisation. During the rehearsals we investigated the possibilities of changing gender as well (Wilén, 2013b). At some point we decided to stick with our own physical genders in the Tosca Scarpia scene so that the characters on stage instead changed connotations in line with the singers who were performing the roles. To put it bluntly, at some points the audience saw Tosca/Scarpia embodied as a man, and at some points as a woman. However, during this summer I realized that I as a performer had taken on the role of Scarpia as enacting a man, not a woman. This becomes clear in the following conversation.

Samuel: The story, the roles are stronger than our genders. And that's quite interesting in a way, it's sort of radical. In one way it means that you are stuck in the conception of Scarpia as a man. But you can also see it as if it doesn't matter what gender we have ourselves. We go so much into the drama that it is the roles, or the relations that are interesting, not our physical genders, to the audience.

Sara: But how did you think?

Samuel: Well I guess I thought that you were a man.

¹¹⁹ The Swedish word here is *schablon*, a mix between template and convention. The concept cliché is problematic in English, since it has a slightly negative value. However it will be used here, in search for a better word.

Sara: But then what were you??

Samuel: Well...

Sara: When you see yourself and how you move.

Samuel: I try not to move like a woman, I just try to... how am I going to get out of this situation. I think. But then, I don't think that much about gender, but it comes in focus when we discuss gender in the scene, and then I start to think, yeah right, it's Sara who performs Scarpia here. And then it would be fun if you were a highhanded woman. So then I try to save it a little, and then it just comes (laughs).

Sara: Well, at the same time I think that when I sit there and you say that to me, it opens an entire world, you couldn't know this. And I realized only last week when I was transcribing my notes from the rehearsals last spring. We talked so much about this, which gender, to exchange the text, and then I realize that all the times we have performed Tosca Scarpia, I have exchanged the text in relation to my fellow actor, but I have still played Scarpia as a man every time.

Later, Alexandra and I discuss the relevance of gender conventions, or clichés in performance.

Alexandra: Well, here's an interesting question for you. Did you act like a woman or a man here?

Sara: I actually act as a man... I realized this only last week.

Alexandra: Yes, because I also see you as a man here. I don't know why, but I do.

Alexandra: But still you think that... I don't know, I have also thought of you a man here, and it might relate to that you choose this with the devil's music and the handshake and... Well, now I know, I think it's awesome, I love how you work with the handkerchief, you wipe the food off. That's a very male thing to do.

Sara: Is it a cliché?

Alexandra: Now I just have to try it (laughs). Well, I guess it is.

Sara: Is it really interesting to see this again, because it really is a cliché?

Alexandra: Well, I still think so even if it is a cliché, since you are a woman but you do it as a man. But even if I think of David and Samuel, it would still be interesting even if it's a cliché, since it tells us something...

Alexandra emphasizes that choosing a cliché is also to choose a certain palette for expression.

Alexandra: It is a choice that still tells us something, it says so much that we don't have to tell in words, you get it told for free. That is interesting in itself, convention or not, that's how I feel.

Gregor describes his view on the use of clichés in opera improvisation.

Gregor: I would say that I use musical clichés... Because I recognize certain motives and such, or, not motives, but rather characteristics, or styles. Everything doesn't occur on a conscious level. I think or want or hope that it perhaps is more like activating our common knowledge base. If I play a dim chord, very simple, it means that something dangerous is about to happen. We know each other so well that even if I'm not aware of it, we will react in a Pavlov way on each other's ways of moving. When Sara moves like that, one part of me knows that she's about to do this. And we have some kind of modes that we do, and some are like, let's go into that room and dance for a while, and we'll see, that you're aware of. And some you are not aware of, and of some you think, oh, that's nice, here comes this one. While some are more, no, now we're doing that again. To me improvisation is very much about clichés, but it doesn't have to be a negative thing. On the contrary, if we fill the clichés with flesh and blood, something real.

4) *Watch the film with annotations.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5w-F0czPJY>

In this film version (containing also the repertoire scene) the analyzed improvisation is at 10.33 – 13.19. Please scroll to this section. Since the scene is a continuation of a repertoire scene, this is an example of intertextual improvisation (theme 2, red) as well as relating to traditions and structures of opera (theme 3, blue). This is not marked in the clip.

Improvisational processes as pragmatic interplay

As a singer, the relations between music, action and language are always present in my work with improvisation. During the years I have investigated different possibilities to look into this, as described above. In the attempts to analyze

transcriptions, physical actions and techniques, text, harmony, and dramaturgical aspects, I perceived that the intuitive and musical aspects of emergent improvisation became difficult to grasp. This could be related to that the mentioned analytic perspectives derive from textual genres, where material is mostly creative by an individual process over time, while opera improvisation is a collaborative performance genre. Indeed, the view on the musical work as common vantage point for Western musical performance practice and analysis is currently undergoing changes. Love (2008) means that the methods for musical analyses so far have treated music as an object, as in the visual arts of architecture and art, thereby forgetting “the testimony of musical experience” (p. 52) where the listener takes part of musical details as a current in an ongoing experience, and perhaps afterwards conceive the piece as a whole. Sawyer (1996) turns against structural models for analyses of group improvisation in his research on jazz and improvised theater, as these would not regard the inherent social structures. He argues that improvisation is contingent, where every moment derives from the primary flow, but at the same time is an unpredictable, collective process, where several persons influence and respond to each other all the time (2000, 2003). During the last decades, music researchers have come to problematize the concept of musical works and relations between work, improvisation and performance (Goehr, 2007), such as in organ musical practice (Johansson, 2008), and in cooperation between performers and composers of contemporary music (Frisk, 2008; Östersjö, 2008) and opera and improvisation (Wilén, 2013b).

This leads me to back to one of the initial questions in this text: how can improvisation be studied and communicated both as performative processes and products? The very recording and repeatedly watching the improvisational processes on film from an outside perspective at the same time transforms them into products, which in turn might be necessary for the research process. To balance this, in IAM the analytical frame itself forms part of the visual material of which the receiver takes part. The combination of interview results and IAM in the session is also an attempt to mix, remix and share experiential and analytical perspectives and experiences of opera improvisational processes, by a kaleidoscopic blending of insider’s and more distanced perspectives. I hope that addressees of this material have had the opportunity to take a more active role in taking part of these perspectives, than if all the information would have been given in one mode, representing a result based solely on the perspective of the distanced researcher.

In conclusion, I see IAM as a potential tool for further investigations of pragmatic aspects of improvisational processes and possibilities to address aspects of group interaction in terms of interplay, contrast and the creation of common materials by

sharing ideas, structures and models. IAM may work as a tool also for other ensembles in order to explore aspects of improvisation, collaborative creativity, communication and language.



Operaimprovisatörerna, Opera Nova- power, love, remix, 2012. Photo: Klara Bodell.

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Article 4

Knowing in action: opera improvisation as a tool for critical creative development for classical singers

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... through performance, “I” come into being.

(Bolt, 2016, p. 135)

Abstract

The article focuses the growing Swedish contemporary musical practice of opera improvisation as an alternative creative method and performative tool for classical performers. A model for analysis of performative knowledge (Bolt, 2016) on symbolic, structural and individual levels (Harding 1986) is discussed. This lays the ground for artistic research outputs that (i) investigate and obtain artistic agency in group improvisation, (ii) develop performative concepts and strategies, and (iii) carry out reflective analysis in-action and on-action by individual singers/researchers.

Examples from four case studies are given, based on analysis of a variety of data. These contrasting productions focus on developing new interfaces between actors, repertoire, and working processes in opera production. Thus opera improvisation can function as a critical tool for singers to challenge their habitus through expressions of body hexis. Further, the development of the group

Operaimprovisatörerna has created a platform for the instigation of structural change in the field.

Introduction

Today, the practice of singers in the Western classical field is dominated by performing composed repertoire in accordance with traditions deriving from the late 19th century, where over the years, famous recordings and performances have come to create norms of interpretation. In opera productions, the singers' part studies are often made together with vocal coaches and teachers, long before they meet the other singers of the opera. In the ensemble work, conductors and directors lead the musico-dramatic processes. Thus, as professional singers' creative processes are still to a great extent dominated by teachers, coaches, conductors and directors, and by their values and opinions. In all, this might risk to restrict the singer's individual agency as well as the chance for performers to make a joint, unique reading and interpretation of the material at hand. However rewarding repertoire work such as this might be, its absolute dominance in the classical field can be delimiting to the performative agency of the singer, as well as the experiences of the audience and the genres of vocal classical music.

The regulative work concept and the performative norms associated with this notion still have a strong influence in the classical field. However, it is in fact quite a modern construction. Before 1850, improvisation was common among Western European singers and musicians. Hultberg (2000) describes this way of learning and playing as the *practical empirical method*, where singers and musicians at all levels expressed themselves through playing according to idiomatic features and structures, and by making individual variations on conventional musical patterns. As argued by Goehr (2007), musicians before the 19th century had a focus on music as a common language, rather than on executing completed works. In turn, this led to the dominance of a *technical-instrumental approach* (Hultberg, 2000, p. 30) focusing on interpretative performances of canonical works, that is, music from the second half of the 19th century and onwards. This norm has been a dominant factor in classical instrumental and vocal teaching in Western conservatoires ever since, and, subsequently, also in the field of cultural production in Western classical music. Hence, the work of the classical singer is framed within hierarchical structures defined by institutions within academia and the art world. This paper discusses the possibility of developing a critical practice with improvisation as a tool for artistic

development. I will argue that the knowledge created through such practices can best be understood through the lense of performativity.

Performativity in artistic research and classical music

The concept of performativity can be traced to speech act theory and the notion of 'performative utterances', proposed by Austin in his famous Harvard lectures in 1955 as an understanding of language as action rather than as representation. Today, the concept is widely used in many fields beyond philosophy and linguistics, and consequently connotes a multitude of interpretations and areas of use. In this article I will argue for the usefulness of performativity as a perspective on artistic research in classical singing, inspired by a poststructural¹²⁰ perspective (Wilén, 2013a).

Butler's definition of performativity as a reiterative power of a discourse, which at the same time produces, regulates and constrains it (Butler, 1993), has come to colour much of the research in the field of gender studies. Butler sees gender as a construction and the gendered body as performative. Gender identity is embodied and constructed through a stylized repetition of acts, or stagings. Butler (1990) argues that ideas of heterosexuality are sedimented, reified body styles which create the illusion of a permanent I through binary gender norms.

Music, voice and performativity

While music has often been studied as a fixed object defined by musical notation, its nature is manifested as a social activity in performances in all cultures around the world (Cross, 2001). Following Butler, Davidson notes that "performativity in music demands that we explore what is embodied, and also brings to the fore the socio-cultural environments in which performances exist" (2014, p. 179). This corresponds to questions about how subjectivity and identities are constructed in the interaction between performers and the cultures where they are situated. Hence, Kartomi (2014) claims that performativity in musical performance refers to "... not only the artist's/artists' production of sounds and movements, persona (stage

¹²⁰ Björk (1999) describes poststructuralism as a philosophical stance that marks a crisis in knowledge in conflict with the Enlightenment, by declaring the death of the subject and questioning concepts of objectivity, development, sense presence and origin.

presence) competence, approach, and style... ” (2014, p. 189) but also productional aspects and all factors considering a performance venue and the communication of it. In group performance, performativity can frame the interactivity in terms of improvisational techniques (ibid). Similarly, I have previously argued that singers who improvise in the style of opera performance are engaged in subjectivity and identity construction in dramatic, musical and rhetorical situations (Wilén 2013a).¹²¹

Herndon (2000) describes a development of a new musicology inspired by literary criticism and cultural studies in USA during the 1990's. Herndon, who is an anthropologist, criticizes the lack of empirical findings in the work of musicologists such as McClary (1991/2002), who in her groundbreaking book claims that gender codes are inscribed in music on a semiotic level. In the musicological analysis of opera there has been a tendency to ignore the non-textual materiality of the performative perspective (Duncan 2004). Even in analytical approaches that take the performer's body into account, the semiotic level remains dominant, as can be seen in Kaleva's (2014) discussion of how a singer in Baroque opera should "transform his sensual body into a semiotic one which would serve as a material for textual meaning" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 89). However, the focus lies again on the visual aspects of the performing body, not the voice or the musical sounds, nor the actions of the performers. Performativity in opera music is a recurrent theme in the work of Ethnerrsson who investigates gender role taking in baroque opera arias (2005), music as performative act and mimetic representation (2008) and the role of the music in terms of narrative and performative modalities in Werle's opera *Drömmen om Therèse* (2014).

Parker & Kosofsky Sedgwick (1995) note the iterability in performance of the speech-act in daily life and the actor's citational practice. This is in line with how performativity is studied in language communication, for example by Robbins (2005):

Performative pragmaticians, however, recognize that the reality of any conversation lies not in the words themselves, but in the drama that they channel – and that drama is perceived or interpreted or felt differently by each person involved in it. (p. 32).

Bauman (2004) sees intertextuality, where a text or a practice comments on other texts or practices, as a crucial feature of oral practices such as storytelling. This process of commenting on other texts in live performance creates intertextual gaps,

121 See also Barker (2008), Dyndahl & Ellefsen (2009), Frith (1996) and Hall (1996).

where the authority of the source utterance can be subverted by the performance of the orator (ibid). Rather than discussing this merely as a relationship between ‘texts’ I have suggested (Wilén 2013a) the term interperformativity¹²² for this phenomenon in opera improvisation performance. This allows for a means of describing the particular dynamic in the relation between performers on stage as well as between an ongoing performance and the body of knowledge represented by tradition.

Performativity, critical thinking and artistic research trajectories

How can a critical understanding of vocal practices in operatic performance be articulated through artistic research? Till (2004) discusses how opera performance might become more self-reflexive by way of developing a critical practice. The performances of Till’s opera company are developed from the “material specifics of actual spaces and places, the particularities of the performers with whom we are working, the givens of found objects and texts, the conditions of a commission, the processes of production” (p. 22). This allows the company to critically address how music relates to the subjectivity of performers, composers and listeners and to question the traditional use of language, narrative as well as vocal and instrumental practices (pp. 22-24). Their artistic practice may be seen as employing a deconstructive method that reveals normative aspects of the genre:

We, however, seek to offer not an ontology of opera, not even the transcendental grounds of its possibility (or impossibility), but to ask ‘what do the forms and discourses of the operatic *mean* – how do they come to mean what they mean – who has invested in these meanings and why - what is at stake in these meanings?’ These are the questions that inform a critical practice (p. 21).

How can such an artistic critical practice be articulated within the field of artistic research? In a discussion of the relations between artistic creation and critical thinking in the research field of arts and crafts, the ceramicist Mårten Medbo (n.p., n.d.) notes that the academization of the arts has led to a power tension between the need for artistic freedom and what he perceives as the academic demand of a critical approach in contemporary arts and research. He argues that the academization of the arts has brought a somewhat hegemonial textual-analytical perspective, where critical thinking and original (*nyskapande*, my translation) art

¹²² See also Haring (1988) and Parks (1988).

creation are considered to be the central criterias when artistic research and development is evaluated.

Medbo (n.d.) further notes that in order to appear original, applying critical thinking early in his work process would probably have been a winning strategy for him as an artist and researcher, However, he notes that such an uncritical embrace of critical thinking inside the creative process could risk destroying the artist's central modes of expression and communication, which for Medbo means his "clay-based verbatim" (*lerbaserad språklighet*, my translation, n.p., n.d.). Medbo claims, that the artist may instead apply a critical perspective on the results of the artistic process.

Examining how critical reflection is used in the Norwegian Artistic Programme 2006-2012, Vassenden (2013) points to a problem when artistic work is translated into verbal concepts and reflection. He notes that the musicians, as compared to other artistic disciplines, are relatively close to traditional scientific genres, with a conventionalised vocabulary "both within and around the art form" (p. 9.). Nevertheless, Vassenden addresses a lack of tools to communicate and contextualize the inner dynamic of the artistic practice in the research outcomes in focus of his investigation:

What is lacking, to put it briefly, is some concepts and theoretical perspectives that could help to link the concrete, personal experience with a bigger artistic discourse in a way that is not seen as external or academic (2013, p. 32).

Could the concept of performativity be used to address the gap suggested by Vassenden? According to Bolt (2016), a performative research paradigm should be understood as a force aiming to create change and development within an artistic practice. She claims that a performative research paradigm differs from quantitative research in the sense that the former operates on repetition with difference, whereas the latter claims validity in creating prerequisites for repetition of the same:

If, as I have argued the research process inaugurates movement and transformation through iterability, what are the forms of this transformation and how are they to be interpreted and evaluated in a realm of research? Thus far, my account of performativity provides an alternative account of how "the new" emerges through iterative practice, rather than through the singular act. We see this "pattern" in our own practices and those of our colleagues and students. It allows us to begin to recognise the conventions (context of theory, context of practice) and map the ruptures that shift practice. Further, it allows us to understand both art as an effect and also what art does in the world (Bolt, 2016, p. 136).

Building on this conception of performativity as critical practice of artistic knowledge production, Bolt (2016, p. 141) suggests a number of questions to be posed to a piece of artistic work:

- How did the research shift material practice in the field?
- What new concepts emerged through the research?
- Do these new concepts shift understandings and practices in the field and/or in other discursive fields?

It may be fair to say that all these questions address a common problem and that they relate to how artistic and conceptual development might be instigated through a piece of artistic research.

The habitus and hexis of the classical singer

Today, classical/art music singers' and musicians' task is to perform a musical work with the intentions of the composer in focus. They interpret and perform the score as correctly as possible according to current norms, traditions and performance practice.

According to Gvion (2015) a crucial part of becoming a classical singer is to develop ways of accumulating corporeal and cultural capital. The aim is to turn the body into a vessel, or an instrument, that can express and communicate emotions generated by a musical text. Gvion uses Bourdieu's concept of habitus in order to delineate this professionalization of a singer's body in terms of achieving cultural capital, to present the self in relation to significant others and the audience. The performances are evaluated based on whether the feelings expressed by the singer through the performance are sincere. To maximize the professionalization of the body the singers are constantly being evaluated by significant others. This is along the lines of findings in a study by psychologist Sandgren (2005) who notes that a major psychological strain for opera singers were negative evaluations from significant others. This would indicate that there are links between singer's concerns with the quality and technique of the voice, and worries about such evaluations. According to Sandgren, professional repertoire singers also oriented their singing lessons towards improving techniques rather than self-expression. Concerns for vocal indisposition and negative criticism were noticeable among professional singers of all ages and performances are commonly considered as merely a display for the singing technique. Unander-Scharin (2014) works with extending the voice with

interactive electronics as a means to empowerment through expansion of “the freedom and expressivity of the solo-singer performing musical drama live on stage” (p. 19) through “re-activating traditions in an overly hierarchical practice, opera” (p. 119). He notes that contemporary opera singers today have little influence over essential creative in their work (ibid).

Opera singers are commonly not expected to engage in the musical pace nor to take responsibility for the musical structure, but rather to concentrate on the singing and acting within the musical drama” (p. 119).

This investment in cultural capital defined in the canon-centered performance practice of Western classical music will in turn affect which singing discourses and situation that the singer will be able to take part of in the work life (Gvion, 2015). Unander-Scharin notes how a stock of about 20 operas composed between 1750-1910 constitutes as the main stock of opera singer repertoire in education and performance (p. 14) to be performed in large opera productions. This has formed structures of the modern opera institutions, as well as the working conditions for singers (ibid). The singers need to know their parts well by heart before rehearsals start, and in their careers often come to perform a delimited number of roles, within a rather delimited field of expression, travelling around between productions. These hierarchical norms and structures at play in a singer’s practice are referred to as “a predominant vocal tradition” or “classical Western singing” (p. 17). A significant effect is that the classical singer constructs his or her professional identity as closely related to this habitus and its value systems: “Western singing, for example, involves disciplining the vocalization of bodies, a socio-cultural practice shaped through specific regimes, with the aim of being accepted into a cohort” (Gvion, 2015, p. 153).

These arguments are in line with with Hemsley’s (2007) descriptions of the opera world, where singers should go for profiling a certain voice type, or Fach, very early in their careers, and not to go beyond that choice. Cotton (2007) shares this point of view, noting that a clear voice classification, based on the physical appearance and the vocal timbre of a singer, in harmony with collective expectations and trends in the classical vocal field, is crucial for a singer in order to succeed in the “market place” (p. 11) of opera.

Coessens & Östersjö (2014 a) describe habitus as “a broad range of embodied patterns that can be applied in rehearsal and performance, containing things to do or not to do, perform or not to perform, show and not show in the moment of artistic action” (p. 336). They propose an understanding of the relation between habitus and hexis which differs from Bourdieu’s theory. Here, hexis is defined as an

interface between the artist's individual artistic goals and the aesthetic context at hand – a zone where a critical relation between a musician's habitus and the resistant materials of musical practice can be activated. In their discussion of experiences from an intercultural, experimental music project they describe how the habitus of the partaking musicians was challenged through the resistances brought by their differing backgrounds and views on music and performance. Working on these areas of friction in turn opened up to new musical role taking and development for the musicians. In short, I interpret Coessens & Östersjö's reading of hexis as a transformative power; a vital part of a creative experimental artistic process, as a zone for transformation, or diffraction of musical agency.

Challenging habitus and canon through performative practice

In order to explore the interaction between improvising singers I have developed a pragmatic analytical model for performative analysis, the Interplay Analysis Model (IAM) (Wilén, 2015). The model has made it possible to study how improvisational narratives are constructed as a result of the actors' diffracting layerings of subject positions in the emergent improvisations, and to discuss how this affects the emerging music. My combined role as researcher and performer offers an individual, analytical perspective of the artistic work from which I can challenge my role as a classical singer. This inside perspective also allows me to track how classical singers may consciously challenge and transform their habitus through the critical tool of improvisation. However, it has remained a challenge to articulate the embodied signification of this process. In order to fully understand the processes at play in musical performance, the relationship between the individual musician and a particular musical culture must be further discussed.

In a critical investigation and development of performativity in musical practice I consider the three levels of gender analysis suggested by Harding (1986) relevant:

- 1) The symbolic level, relating to conceptions and norms
- 2) The structural level, how work is divided and organized in society.
- 3) The individual level, and the gender identity of the individual. (jamstallskola.se, n.d.)

In line with Coessens and Östersjö's (2014 b) and Hofvander Trulsson's (2010) view of hexis and musical agency, I will in the sections below exemplify how hexis can be seen as an expression of critical engagement with a musician's habitus in the practice of Oi on these three levels. The examples demonstrate a number of performative

strategies I find important in the development of critical creative practices for classical singers.

Some of the projects from where the examples are taken are already inspired by concepts such as performativity and gender studies. These can be seen as examples of practice-based artistic research (Rubidge, 2004/n.d.), in line with Till's (2004) approach of conceptual artistic development. In the analysis of other examples, I have instead searched for performative strategies, in order to track theoretical aspects that may be implicated through the practice. Through my interpretation of Harding's (1986) definitions I aim to show that the questions outlined by Bolt (2016) above could be interpreted on several levels, including symbolic (intertextual/interperformative), structural (transgressing situations and positions), and individual (body hexis). Needless to say, these are not categories, but overlaid aspects.

Operaimprovisatörerna as a platform for collaborative critical practice

The ensemble *Operaimprovisatörerna* (Oi) has since its initiation in 2007 staged 15 productions and hundreds of performances in festivals, theatres, media, schools and corporate contexts. All the members are classically trained singers and musicians who work with improvisational techniques in collaborative creative processes. Stylistically, the music is inspired by classical/art music and opera (Wilén 2013 a). Oi works by taking the drama as a starting point for the music, rather than using pre-composed musical material. In performance, the audience is invited as co-creators. These improvisations can be seen as iterative acts through which the performers use and challenge their cultural capital as classical singers and the performative discourses of the classical field, with regard to individual, structural and symbolic relations to author, performer, and the musical work.

Oi's first years focused on investigating operatic improvisation as an artistic format, and on developing dramaturgical techniques and skills. An analytical overview points to a shift of focus in the ensemble's work: While the first productions (2007-2009) emphasize the development of skills, the later ones (2012-2016), display an interest in investigating the performative frames of operatic improvisation situations by i) deconstructing gender and power norms in performance, and ii) interacting with orchestras, repertoire, choirs and conductors in order to instigate change in other institutional bodies.

Deconstructing gender norms and power relations

Dyndahl (2005) suggests that traditional remix may be understood as an alternative panning, or changes in relations between background and foreground on a track, through the processing and reorganisation of elements in a sonic structure. He describes a variety of methods, from reconfigured relations between tracks in a recording, to exclusions or additions of materials on more detailed levels (Dyndahl). According to Middleton (2000) the remix culture can be seen as “the final nail in the coffin of work-thinking” (p. 62). Influenced by the notion of remix, launched a production, *Opera Nova – power, gender, remix* which wished to challenge traditional gender norms through the juxtaposition of roles. For instance, a scene from Puccini’s *Tosca* could be remixed so that Scarpia could be a fairly short soprano at one moment and a very tall baritone in the next, while *Tosca* was a tenor or a mezzo-soprano of average height. In performance, what is remixed is not only two audio tracks but rather the subject positions of the singers on stage. This may also be understood through Derrida’s view of representation in theatre (Derrida, 1997, p. 305). One signifier (here: Scarpia) could denote several signifieds (here: singers) and have many meanings, and the connection between signified and signifier is thus destabilized (Dyndahl, 2008). Derrida (2001) describes language as an infinite play with signs and significations within discourses, a structure, or a centreless field (due to that there is no central signified of absolute, transcendent meaning). Further, Wilén discusses the production in the following manner:

The differing voices and bodies of *Tosca* and *Scarpia* can also be seen as a play, a way of investigating discourses of power. The different singers with different voices, bodies, and sexes perform power through different strategies. The same relation was embodied in different shapes, as a deconstruction of mimetic realistic acting and discourses of power connected to the voice colour and vocal range in opera performance (Wilén 2013 b, p. 116).

In performance, performative knowledge can be articulated on symbolic levels, and can as such also give rise to further analytical discourse. The first stage conversation was arranged at Moment:teater in Gubbängen, Stockholm, before the premiere in March 2012. In the panel two members started a dialogue that later continued in social and cultural media. This contributed to a debate on opera sexism in the spring of 2012, illustrating how repertoire opera is perceived and performed in Sweden today (Brodrej, 2012; Dellefors, 2012; Ernman, 2012; Gademan, 2012; Hammar, 2012; Lindén, 2012; Lindkvist, 2012; Löfvendahl, 2012; Maticic, 2012; Operaimprovisatörerna, 2012; Söderberg, 2012; Witt-Brattström, 2012). In this way, the stage conversation served as a vital forum for instigating a debate of

gendered roles (both on and off stage) in operatic performance in Sweden. In 2015, Oi continued this line of investigation in a production, *Opera Nova for Young People*, thematizing power and gender addressed to a young audience, including performances and also workshops where students and teachers were given possibilities to explore symbolic, structural and individual notions of gender and power in drama exercises and joint reflective discussions.

Interaction with other musical actors

In 2014 Oi and the Swedish Chamber Orchestra designed *Last Minute – an opera adventure!* (LM) for a young audience. The production was staged at the Hjalmar Bergman theatre in Örebro in October 2014, with conductor Andreas Hanson, and at the Concert Hall in Örebro in October 2016, with conductor Eric Solén.

13 orchestral extracts by composers such as Bizet, Mozart, Tjajkovskij and Verdi were chosen and arranged by Alexandra Orrgård Solén and Eric Solén. The pieces were labeled with letters from A to O so that the musicians could easily find them on their music stands during performance, since they did not know which pieces would be played or in what order. The aim was to create an orchestral fundament for the ensemble to improvise upon.

The audience was invited to bring items that could be used as props in the performance. Based on suggestions from the audience, an opera of about 27-30 minute was improvised, with the Oi pianist Gregor Bergman acting as a musical dramaturge. He would improvise with the singers between the orchestral parts while he chose the next piece for the orchestra, by showing the conductor the letter that represented the piece. All of this happened behind the back of the singers.

In an interview, the orchestra's conductor Andreas Hanson describes how he at the outset of LM doubted that the opera improvisations would manage to frame the music into a dramatic entity. He also wondered how it would be possible to know what would happen next. During the rehearsals this scepticism gave way to a free and pragmatic sensation as he discovered that Oi didn't work according to the usual interpretive norms of repertoire music. This culture in opera and symphonic music is described by Hanson as dominated by a consensus, formed by recordings and performances of star singers and conductors. Their interpretations become normative, setting rules for how classical music is supposed to be interpreted. As a contrast Hanson perceives the extemporated opera narrative as a trigger for the orchestra's creativity. The priority of the operatic story gave way for new attitudes

towards the music in the orchestra, which affected their way of performing the arranged repertoire.

Hanson: What it released in the Swedish Chamber Orchestra [...] is also a kind of freedom in the playing. Issues that we could have engaged in during the rehearsals, regarding timing or balance, were suddenly resolved, because something else became more important in the moment, even for the orchestral musicians. Their curiosity about the story made their playing more relaxed than ever, because it became secondary.

Wilén: A means for the story.

Hanson: Yes exactly. And not secondary as in sitting in an orchestral pit and accompanying Figaro, but secondary in the sense that it is more important that the children understand the story.

Hanson notes that the project sometimes caused strong instinctive reactions in him as a conductor, for example when he conducted the Flower Aria from Carmen and encountered huge silent gaps where he expected the vocal line. However, he eventually found that these situations could prompt different ways of music making:

To me it was very good to be forced out in the freedom, as it were, not to conduct Verdi, Bellini, Mozart as I think it's supposed to be, but that it depended on what you were telling, it affected my choice of tempo, or what I would do with the dynamics. More specifically, the fact that I was forced to improvise in the moment was very informative for me. I take this with me from this production. And then of course my respect for your work increased when I realized how skilled you were in creating the stories.

When an entirely different text and story emerged, it affected him and the orchestra to change their ways of playing and conducting.

But to play Carmen... and then something completely else comes, a completely different text and an entirely different story. It makes you change your performance in little, little details... As much as you can keep up while playing. And when you understand that this is not the Flower Aria, it just happens to be Bizet constituting the foundation here. It makes you play, and I felt for my part that I conducted in a different way, seen from a craftsman's perspective. And it's quite interesting. Because the deliberating thing about the improvisation is that you don't have the rulebook open. It also made me freer in my way of conducting. That is, I felt that I can do like this. I am allowed to. I can do this accelerando. I can also make this fermata really short, if I want.

These examples from the LM production suggest that improvisation can function as a critical tool in relation to the classical repertoire and its interpretation. Furthermore, one can see how the Oi practice can in itself function as a platform for instigating structural change in other musical institutions.

An example of a similar encounter is the ongoing project Gravity of Life (GoL). During 2015, Wilén worked closely with the composer Ulrika Emanuelsson and the project leader Mette af Klint, looking for a concept which would allow for a dynamic relation between composed and improvised materials. This would entail a process that would be challenging both for Oi as improvisers and for the composer. Furthermore, one goal was to find musico-dramatic methods where the improvisers could interact with choir singers. The composer developed musical material in relation to themes collected from the Oimembers, which were edited and used as lyrics in the composed parts. The three themes were:

- I. Weightlessness – We don't know yet, the question is in the air (*Life's eternal quagmire*)
- II. Tension piles up and is released (*In the eye of the storm*)
- III. Time rolls on as we lick our wounds (*In the weightless bosom of the universe*)

In May 2016, Oi worked with actor and clown Camilla Persson and investigated new patterns of stage interaction in physical movement and improvisational techniques, focusing individual initiatives and expressions in group interaction formats. In cooperation with the composer and the choir conductor Sofia Söderberg, we designed a two-day workshop with six choirs in the Malmö/Lund and Stockholm regions. GoL created collaborative processes similar to the ones discussed above. Also here, the improvisational practice prompted new developments in as well as in the participating choirs. The choir singer Emma Oldbring writes:

I came in with one conception (extremely sceptical) and exited with a whole other feeling. I never thought that anyone would make me perform these improvisations, with or without audience, and feel completely comfortable, but there it was!

Conductor Sofia Söderberg writes:

With a total openness the opera improvisers make their co-actors jump into the unknown. With their help we dare to explore our impulses without first censoring them. The result is surprising, ravishing and every performance and workshop is completely new and unique – it is never performed more than

once. This group succeeds with the feat to rely in substance, experience and knowledge in the solid tradition of opera and depth, as they open up to the now, the contemporary and the future.

With LM and GoL, Oi developed two new performance concepts that aimed at investigating the relations between themselves as classical performers and other agents in the classical music field. This can be seen as a way of developing and spreading new ways of critical approaches to agents in the classical field on a structural level.

Interaction, body hexis and the individual singer

In traditional opera, repertoire singers are usually assigned certain characters within the fictive dramatic framework. The actions of the characters are not to be changed during performance. For instance, a singer performing as Queen of the Night in Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* impersonates this character throughout the opera, acting dramatically according to the agreements with the director, and musically as interpreter of the score in accordance with the agreements with the conductor. She would not change the important dramatic actions or the musical material during performance but repeat them in performance night after night. In contrast, a fundamental concept in Oi's practice is to question these conventions and provide tools for developing alternative strategies. The following examples will demonstrate how the improvisers challenge the agency of the classical singer in performance, by altering their subject positions. In the first example, Wilén as the Queen acts as the dramatic character but also, in interaction with all other performers and the audience, in the roles of composer, director, dramaturge and narrator.

a) The Bell scene – narrative play

This improvised opera, from a performance in October 2016, emerged as a story set in Austria in 1842. A herd boy in the mountains and a queen in the castle meet and discover they are mother and son. The Bell scene starts when one of the singers lifts one of the little bells Oi had received as props from the audience. The percussion player spontaneously gives a response with the triangle to the sound of the bell, which affects the creation of the opera narrative:

A bell rings. Orrgård Solén enters as narrator, carrying a chair and posing it on the place of the queen's throne. Bergman chooses a folk sounding music, with a joddling melody in the middle and low register accompanied by drone chords. "Another sleepless night for the poor queen. She is not happy. She doesn't like the confined life in the castle. She dreams" (Wilén enters) "about a happy life, outside, in the mountains in the free air." (Wilén opens a fictive window on the same place as Orrgård Solén did in an earlier scene to re-establish the same room). "She carries her bell with her" (Orrgård Solén approaches Wilén from behind with the bell hanging from her hand and Wilén reaches for it without turning around and looks at it, while Solén exits with an elegant gesture with the arm).

Bergman starts playing a melody line that climbs upwards as Wilén turns to the orchestra with the bell in her lifted hand. She makes a 360 degree slow turn as they take up the next announced piece of music and jingles the bell slowly. Bergman plays a major, lyrical romantic theme.

"Bell, little bell" (Wilén jingles it slowly and hears the triangle in the orchestra reply).

"Ah, it replies!" She jingles it and the orchestra starts playing the aria from Norma by Bellini. During the following bars, Flogell jingles the cowbell and the percussionist replies with the triangle.

"The bells in the valley, they are answering! They give their sound in return! They remind me of days when I was allowed to run in the mountains. Not just being bored and listen to opera all day. Even before lunch I have to sit and listen to concerts that they play for me."

As an improviser, Wilén perceives and responds to the vocal, dramatic and musical actions taken by the other performers and to the reactions of the audience. Such an open and receptive approach is of course crucial also for a repertoire singer interpreting an opera scene. However, in opera improvisation the communications that take place give shape to the created music, the drama and the text as unique, emerging materials. This is not the case in repertoire music, in which performance practice is dominated by the regulative work concept (Goehr, 2007) and musical improvisation is rare.

In the Bell scene, Wilén transgresses the dramatic role of the queen in the opera in two ways. First, she uses the prop, a bell, to establish an interaction with the percussionist in the orchestra from within the dramatic role. Second, she notices that some of the audience members appear to be restless in their seats. She responds by shifting perspective and lets the queen in turn become restless. Later in the scene, she turns to the audience and asks for them to decide whether the herd boy is the queen's son or not, thereby giving them the decisive responsibility for the end of the

opera. Her vocal action emanates from the circumstances in the room, i.e. the relation to the percussionist and some of the young audience members, and expands the dramatic identity of the queen from the inside, which in turn affects the operatic story on a narrative level. These altered subject positions can be seen as challenging the habitus of the classical singer through body hexis (Hofvander Trulsson 2010, Coessens & Östersjö 2014) and, thereby, as articulations of a critical understanding of classical vocal performance in the present day.

Bell Scene 161014, mixed cameras 03,05

<https://vimeo.com/196360131/24ffd734ea>

Bell Scene and end of the opera 161014, mixed cameras 04,38

<https://vimeo.com/198148927/d2d97304b8>

b) The Conciliation scene - negotiations of power

The following example¹²³ from October 2016 demonstrates how two improvisers work on negotiating the power relations between the main characters in a decisive conflict scene. It also suggests a development within the individual improvisers in the ensemble. In an interview from 2012, one singer in the group pointed to the difficulty of remaining within the fictive context in some conflict scenes. Due to the proximity between the individual performers in improvisatory processes, improvisers can become uneasy when a scene requires a dramatic, or aggressive attitude towards a colleague. They might worry about being too rough and back off, using humour as a deflective strategy. This issue has been discussed in 's work over time:

We shouldn't be afraid of letting it get serious, sincere and really, really mean something, and not to have, what are they called, quotation marks? But to feel grounded. I think that's almost the hardest thing, to really be grounded and not, just fluff on top of everything. Well, fluff, that's some kind of quick fix, or escape in scenes where you feel that you adapt too much, or you don't dare to break, or defend your character.

¹²³ The scene is taken from one of the Gravity of Life workshop productions in Magle Concert Hall in Lund on October 27th 2016, with conductor Sofia Söderberg and a choir from the music aesthetic college *Lars Erik Larsson-gymnasiet*.

This improviser notes that once the humour path is chosen, it is almost impossible to return to the dramatic conflict. In 's artistic development, it seemed necessary to challenge this approach in order to allow for a wider range of dramatic expressions.

In a more recent example below, the improvisers use the negotiations and transitions of power in a more fluctuating manner and are able to return to the situation of conflict.

In a particular scene, it has recently become clear that a close relative to the husband in a marriage crisis was murdered by the couple's neighbour many years ago. The wife has known this for a long time without telling anyone. After finding the courage to confront the neighbour with what she knows, she finally tells her husband, who reacts very strongly, just as this scene begins. This narrative text is based on an IAM analysis tracking details of the actions.

Flogell (the husband) and Wilén (the wife) start a new scene using an overlap technique, where they "take over" the vocal space as Hornwall's dramatic aria together with the choir ends. As they take place on the stage, Hornwall and the choir leave, and Bergman gradually slows the music down. When there is a short silence, Flogell takes a clear power position, continuing his line of accusation: "Murdered her? Has he murdered her?" Wilén and Bergman immediately answer by making a musical transit into a calmer atmosphere, where Wilén responds to Flogell's power display by avoiding responsibility "I don't know, you go ask him, and stop passing it on to me." After this intense start, Flogell backs off from his power position, also physically by taking a few steps back. He makes a twist towards a comical situation by referring to a silly detail that has emerged during the opera; the couple's tea consumption: "I've made some tea". This might be a rhetorical comment to the audience, since there have been tea scenes previously in the opera. Wilén vocally accompanies Flogell into the comedy layer by referring to a specific sort of tea: "Thank you, is it rooibos?" However, she remains standing still in a formal, military position by his side.

Flogell then immediately shifts back into the dramatic conflict, with a power initiative in a high exclamation that Bergman instantly supports. Wilén also shifts back, by walking across the stage into a kitchen, miming to dip a tea bag in a cup. The audience laughs as Flogell makes a new comical twist, commenting on an instant hurt in the throat from the strong exclamation. By this, he offers Wilén a power position. This might be seen as a performative comment from Flogell to the others in the room, telling them that he is aware of his claims to a high power position by acting aggressively inside the dramatic situation. As Flogell complains about his throat, Bergman waits by playing a musically open chord with a repeated note in the middle register. He then moves slowly upwards chromatically. While Wilén twists back into the dramatic conflict, giving the power back by asking "Do you think...?". Bergman plays a slow transition, waiting for the singers' dramatic

direction. Flogell approaches Wilén in the dramatic conflict, challenging power with a short accusation: "Bengt?" Wilén remains in a passive position, standing still with her head turned down. As Flogell approaches her and grabs her clothes, she avoids physical conflict, replying "Now stop it."

An analysis of this scene show that the improvisers use power negotiations intuitively in the course of work and have incorporated this into their performative strategy as a tool, or instrument, in order to remain in the dramatic situation. I noticed this more frequently here than in previous analyses, and my conclusion is that my ability to perceive these power negotiations might have increased thanks to the work with the gender and power projects (ON 2012, ONY 2015). The format of GoL, where the composed parts encouraged the singers to remain in a certain expression also contributed to the ability to endure the dramatic conflict inside that same scenic situation. The musical material is affected by the negotiations, passing through exclamations and transitions but still turning back to longer melodic themes.

Final scene GoL 161027, uncoded 04,32

<https://vimeo.com/191992672/baa5eb1068>

Final scene GoL 161027, IAM analysis coded 04,32

<https://vimeo.com/195235560/1fb7e41944>

Summary: diffracting the musical agency of the classical singer

As argued by Bolt (2016), a performative perspective can allow for an understanding of knowledge production in the performative arts. A reading of the above examples taken from my practice as an improvising classical singer may suggest the possibility of a knowledge created through performance.

An example of structural impact of performative knowledge is found in the collaborative process of developing Operaimprovisatörerna into a platform for singers' and pianists' individual investigations in a critical engagement with classical music cultures. In a number of conceptual productions, Oi has created performances that address issues of gender and power in classical music, using theoretical notions

as points of departure. These concepts have been suggested by me as singer-researcher, but carried out in the context of the ensemble.

Classical vocal improvisation can function as a tool that enables singers to investigate aspects of identity making, questioning their own and other's body hexis on both conscious and unconscious levels. Moreover, a group such as Oi can be seen as a performative platform for singers to engage in critical dialogue with hegemonic structures of canon and the work concept in the classical field, through strategies of interperformativity, intertextuality and transgressing between the layered situations. Challenging the musical agency and body hexis could give the singer agency to transform her/his perspectives and professional identity. Following Hofvander Trulsson (2010), I see how actions of body hexis take place on both conscious and unconscious levels. More importantly, performative knowledge is not articulated mainly as propositional knowledge but instead in the form of vocal action, as new ways of being-in-the-world as a classical singer. This argument is supported by Medbo (n.d.) who claims the importance of giving the artist within a craft the necessary space for an artistic creativity which is not at all times controlled by a critical, intellectual stance. This knowledge is often created through expressions of body hexis: when a performer stretches beyond habit and articulates a critique towards regulative classical performance norms, sometimes on symbolic levels. Significantly, Oi has, over the last few years, been increasingly engaged in projects where other actors in the field are confronted with this practice. The strongest structural impact of the group lies in these interactions such as seen in the quotes from Hanson, Oldbring and Söderberg. Here, the conventions that regulate the performance interpretation of classical repertoire can be questioned through the introduction of a practice of improvisation. Oi as a platform for such a critical practice can then be understood as a possible instigator of structural change.

Through the examples presented above I have showed how artistic research has contributed to change in material practice, in artistic concept development in the field of classical singing, similar to what was suggested by Bolt (2016) above. A platform for critical artistic development in artistic research should preferably take both conscious and unconscious action levels into account in order to give space for transformation of agency and professional identity for a singer. This may be seen to happen both inside the productions and inside the process of material analysis, articulation and communication of the insights from the projects through other media than the performances. In the processes of artistic research, the structural impact situated in action, in the bodily expression of hexis, also becomes articulated in verbal discourse through dialogue and video analysis. A performative paradigm for artistic research allows for an understanding and communication of how such

knowledge can be created and communicated in forms beyond qualitative and quantitative epistemologies.

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Article 5

Classical vocal improvisation in context: the musical canon, gender and creativity

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In the contemporary field of classical/art music, improvisation plays a minor role, especially when it comes to vocal practice. However, an historical overview conducted from my perspective as an artistic researcher, classical singer and improviser (Wilén 2013 a; 2013b; 2015) shows that, although largely absent in classical practice today, improvisation was a vital part of vocal performance up until the 19th century. This article will describe how vocal improvisation was closely related to expressions of creativity among female performers in the European music salons. During the early 19th century the vocal improviser also became a popular figure in literary works of writers such as Georges Sand, Mary Shelley and Germaine de Staël. Improvisation as vocal practice declined due to emerging hierarchical structures and aesthetics mainly focusing male creativity in 19th century public concert institutions. This also came to affect the musical learning methods in conservatoires and academies of music. The paper concludes with a discussion on how these factors still affect the musical agency of classical singers in education and performance, and how a dialogical relation between interpretation and improvisation could be used for developing creative methods and relations to new audiences in the classical field of today.

Vocal improvisation in Western music history

Improvisation is often described as a central part of human activity (Bailey, 1992; Berkowitz, 2010). Groute and Palisca (1988) claim that “improvisation, in one form

or another, is the normal way in most musical cultures” (p. 97) and assume that is was the only way of making music in Western Europe until the 9th century. Ornamental improvisation in both vocal and instrumental practice has been used by Western singers and musicians through history (Benestad, 1994). One of the first, anonymous, written sources of musical improvisation gives rules for how a *discantum* (upper part) can be composed extempore (Magrini, 1998). Vocal and instrumental schools of the 17th and 18th centuries by for example Leopold Mozart, Carl Philip Emmanuel Bach and Leopold Quantz bear witness of how improvisation was part of vocal and instrumental practice. In *Le Nouvelle Musiche singer* (1602) the singer and composer Giulio Caccini describes how singers should ornament their coloraturas in relation to the text and the melody. Monteverdi in his music aimed to realize the Aristotelian idea that poetry imitates action, by combining rhythm, harmony and melody in the form of recitatives (Bergström, 2000), and encouraged singers to ornament their vocal parts where it was required by the drama (Orrey, 1996). The vocal school of the Italian castrato singer Tosi from 1723 (1905) includes advice to singers on how to vary their arias during performance:

”§ 13. The most necessary Study for singing *Airs* in Perfection, and what is more difficult than any other, is to seek for what is easy and natural, as well as of beautiful Inventions. One who has the good Fortune to unite such two rare Talents, with an agreeable *putting forth* of the Voice, is a very happy Singer.” (1905, p. 97, writer’s italics.)

According to Somerset-Ward (2004) Tosi’s school treats church music as well as opera and chamber music, and therefore can be seen as a historic document of vocal practice in the 18th century.

Musical salons of the 19th century

The musical salon (also named *soirée* or open house) during the 19th century is described by Holmqvist (2000) as a “semi-public” (*halvoffentlig*, my translation, p. 21) arena, characterized by both public and private artistic, intellectual and political dimensions and expressions. That is, it was at the same time a social community forum and an aesthetical forum, offering a platform for amateurs and professionals to meet and perform. The salons were generally led and organized by female hostesses, and frequented by both women and men. The salon provided men and women with a possibility for personal and intellectual development on relatively equal grounds: “As a structure built on interconnectedness and community, the *salon* functioned as a brilliant socio-intellectual locus for gifted women” (Citron 2000, p.

56). Also in Sweden, the salons became important arenas for female artists and musicians (Öhrström, 1987). In the early 19th century, public channels of distributing culture were not developed, and the salons functioned as critical fora and cultural consumption arenas. For example, a salon such as Malla Silfverstolpe's in Uppsala during the 1830s and 1840s promoted individual artistic careers but was also a social and cultural interface between aristocrats, bourgeoisie and the academic world (Holmqvist, 2000).

Before 1850, improvisation was an integrated part of musical practice in Western classical music (Hultberg, 2000). Also in the salons, many musicians and singers improvised. According to eyewitness descriptions, these public performances were often interactive, and the communication with the audience played an important part (Esterhammer, 2008). In the 18th century the improviser's social abilities, wit and esprit were highly regarded.

The music performed by women in the salons had an ennobling function: expressing emotions and creating atmospheres, while all the time featuring the women as graceful symbols of beauty, culture and education, although within the boundaries of femininity, as inspired by novels by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Holmqvist, 2000). Female musicians mostly practiced singing, the piano and the harp, and it was important that the instrumental practice did not make them appear less feminine. DeNora (2002) describes how women in Vienna of the 19th century avoided for example wind instruments or cello, that would engage the body in undesired, improper ways, which could risk giving the audience erotic connotations. While playing the flute or the horn was not advisable, piano and singing were very popular.

Women avoided these instruments because their playing interrupted notions about bodily decorum; notions that celebrated a quiet body not engaged in physical effort, and notions that stretched across Europe and back at least a century. (DeNora, 2002, p. 28).

Women could practice music, both as performers, composers and producers within the salon framework, but in musical performance, women's physical appearances and actions should emphasize femininity rather than the reflective musical expression that was seen as a vital artistic aim in the growing public music life (Öhrström, 1987). During the later half of the 19th century, the bourgeois salon became a more private forum. In Silfverstolpe's Uppsala, the women performed songs which were aimed to socialize them in their in social life. Female singers were there often idealized as singing angels or madonnas, in attempts to ignore their sexuality. Married women were portrayed as humble and patient, singers as

dramatic, whereas young women performed songs depicting innocent, sacred and holy emotions (ibid).

The improviser as creator

Poetic vocal improvisation in verse or in prose, often with instrumental accompaniment, had a peak in Italy¹²⁴ during the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries. Audiences would test improvisers by giving them historical, literary and mythological subjects to improvise on. Many Europeans from higher classes travelled to Italy during the 18th and 19th centuries, and described their experiences of vocal improvisation in letters, travel stories and articles. In this way the Italian tradition of improvisation came to influence the culture in other European countries during this period, where improvisation was often highlighted as exotic, connected to the lively temperament of the Italians, and the beauty and flexibility of the language. During the 19th century the improviser became a popular figure in literature. Esterhammer (2008) describes how English writers such as Mary and Percy Shelley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron and John Keats, met improvisers and were influenced by their situated performances in their writing.

During the early 19th century, improvisation became a symbol for Romantic artistic aesthetics, as a physical manifestation of creativity, where the improviser often was highly affected, as in fever. The Italian-Suede Matilda d'Orozco was a renowned singer, improviser, composer and pianist who arranged tableaux, concerts, salons and performances in private homes in Sweden during the early 19th century. She was an aristocrat, free to engage in artistic activities, and there are many examples of overwhelmingly positive descriptions of her performances and publications of her songs widely spread during her lifetime (Öhström 1987, 2007). Nevertheless, she chose to describe herself as merely a music lover, or poor cheater in music in dialogues with others (Montgomery-Cederhielm, 1919; Öhrström, 1987). In the descriptions, she is often portrayed as a fervent, passionate Southern beauty due to her national heritage (Öhrström).

Esterhammer (2008) describes contemporary impressions of Taddei in the following way:

¹²⁴ Similar traditions have been noted also in other European countries such as Greece, Spain, Germany, Ireland, Wales and former Yugoslavia (Esterhammer, 2008).

By focusing on the appearance of the performer as a languishing or a frenzied poet and reading the performance as a physical manifestation of inspired creativity, English and German witnesses assimilate this spectacle to the aesthetics of Romanticism.” (p. 128)

Taddei, as Orozco in Sweden, was seen as a somewhat exoticized symbol of the Italian temperament. Wilhelm Waiblinger describes how he witnessed Taddei entering the stage, tormented and pale, but later caught fire by the act of creation, as an oracle possessed by some god (in Esterhammer, 2008). This also illustrates the double image of the improvisers, according to the writer.

In literature of the time, improvisation, practiced by female *improvisatrici* and male *improvisatori*, is described as a well-known tradition in all parts of Italian society. The improvisers performed on the streets, in taverns, salons and theaters. Esterhammer (2008) describes how the travellers’ stories of these performances made the genre as well as the artists famous all over Europe. The *improvisatrice* Corilla Olimpica performed at the courts of the emperesses Maria Theresia of Austria and Catherine the Great, and was laureated on the Capitolium, as the third poet in Italian history in 1776.

In the novel *Corinne* (1807), Germaine de Staël depicts an English-Italian *improvisatrice* as an independent and celebrated artist, who perishes in her meeting with love. In the novel, poetic-musical improvisation is used as a theme to portray a talented and celebrated female artist. Corinne is an educated improviser, an aristocrat who has won the favour of the people. She improvises in moments of true inspiration, on historical subjects given by the audience, as for example the glory and joy of Italy in the beginning of the novel: ”Italy, mistress of the world, cradle of literature, I salute you” (2008, p. 28). de Staël chose to write the improvisations in prose and not in verse and it seems as if the gendered feminine values Corinne impersonates was part of the novel’s great success during its time. The talented and acclaimed female Italian poet meets her death since she is dominated by her passionate, unhappy love for an English man who rejects her. Holmquist (2000) notes how Atterbom and his colleagues worshipped Corinne for the portrait of a female poet and genius, with a true female heart; a loving mind whose passionate and free love for a cowardly and undeveloped man caused her death, since not even she could transcend the social conventions of the time (p. 85). This novel influenced the genre of improvisation, which came to symbolize female artistry in English literature (Esterhammer, 2008). Both Fehrman (1974) and Witt-Brattström (2011) give examples of how widely known Corinne was. In *Gösta Berlings saga* by Selma Lagerlöf, the novel is thrown into the jaws of some hungry wolves (Fehrman, 1974, p. 53), who follow Gösta Berling and Anna Stiernhök during a sleigh ride in the

forest (Lagerlöf, 1978, p. 61). According to Witt-Brattström, no Swedish female writer in the early 19th century could avoid relating to Corinne, a female genius, and a symbol of resistance. The composer Giacomo Puccini partly based the opera *The journey to Reims* on de Staël's novel, and in the opera, Corinna is the name of a famous Roman poet. de Staël was driven into exile by Napoleon in 1803.

When asked about the grounds for her improvisation, Corinne replies:

To me, improvisation is like a lively conversation. I don't let myself be bound by any particular subject, I go along with the impression that my listener's interest make on me, and it is to my friends that I owe the greatest part of my talent in this field. Sometimes the passionate interest aroused in me by a conversation /.../ raises me above my powers, enables me to discover in nature, in my own heart, bold truths expressions full of life, which solitary reflection would not have produced." (De Staël, 2008, p. 45-46,)

The Italian *improvvisatore* Tommaso Sgricci made a great international career as improviser, and visited cities such as Paris and London. Antonov (2009) describes how Sgricci was considered controversial and politically radical, due to his performances and lifestyle as open homosexual in Italy during the early 19th century. The audience was entranced by his performances, renowned for the high energy and Sgricci's vivid mimic expressions. Sgricci recited without instruments, and improvised tragedies, where he performed all the male and female parts alone (ibid). Atterbom (2002) describes how he participated in a so called *Accademia*, a party who had gathered to hear Sgricci perform. Sgricci improvised on a subject for about two hours, which Atterbom perceived as a strange phenomenon: "det är verkligen ett förunderligt fenomen för oss nordlänningar" (p. 441). It was common that the audience made suggestions for the improvisations which were collected and read out aloud, so that the improviser could choose. Free improvisation made it possible to address political subjects in public and Austrian police was often present in Italian improvised performances in the early 19th century, censoring the suggestions from politically fervent issues. In a performance of the improviser Sgricci at the opera La Scala in Milan in 1816 (Esterhammer, 2008), one of the suggestions contained the name of Vittorio Alfieri, national poet and activist in *Il Risorgimento*, that fought for an independent Italy. The whole salon was filled with exultation, and the police then forbade the subject.

But were there any improvising opera singers? Rosa Taddei was mentioned as a lyrical poet, and became famous for her improvisations in Roman theatres in the 1820s. She sang to melodic accompaniment, and some improvisations were transcribed (Esterhammer, 2008). In a novel by Georges Sand (1843/1920), the

character Consuelo is an opera singer and well-known virtuoso in the European *opera seria*. She makes friends with a young Joseph Haydn, and in (only) one scene in the novel she makes a free improvisation in a garden. She asks Haydn to take his violin and play a ritornel, and then starts to improvise a song about two poor 15-year old children, who imitate birds.

”Sjunga, sade Consuelo, se där vad vi ha att göra. Tag fiolen och spela vilken ritornello som helst, den första du kommer på. Joseph lydde och Consuelo började med hög röst improvisera följande prosasång - Vi äro två små fattiga femtonårsbarn, ej starkare och styggare än näktergalarna, vilkas sång vi härma.” (1920, s. 257)

The Swedish poet Per Daniel Amadeus Atterbom portrays improvisers that he met on his journeys in Italy between 1817-1819, in personal letters as well as in his work *Memories from Germany and Italy* (2002). For example, he describes a Neapolitan folksinger performing a meeting between a saint and some devils, oscillating between tragedy and comedy:

”Dramatisk improvisation av en Napolitansk folksångare på Petri-platsen, i en talrik krets av åhörare. Mannen, en person av lägsta folk-klassen, men välväxt, med livliga, uttrycksfulla ögon, framställde ett äventyr mellan ett Helgon och några djävlar, som slutligen blevo övermästrade. Han beledsagade sin häftiga gestikulation med ackompanjemang av tamburin, varvid han dansade och deklamerade recitativiskt. Stycket spelade ömsevis i tragisk, ömsevis i komisk färg.” (s. 515, förf. kursiv.)

The Italian improvisers used classical meters such as *ottave rime* with the structure ABABABCC, which was popular during the Renaissance, and used by Italian poets such as Ariosto and Tasso. The improvisers were often given historical, literary and mythological subjects by the audience, but also improvised without an audience. Atterbom (2002) describes how three singers at the Colosseum improvise on a biblical theme for their own pure joy:

”De mest *poetiska* improvisatörerne, d.v.s. de som sjunga av ren lust och hjärtats grund, äro nu ibland det *lägre folket* att finna. Sådana voro de tre, som växelvis tillsamman improviserade över ett bibliskt ämne, sittande i coliseen en mänskenskväll utan åhörare, blott av ren glädje och lust för saken” (2002, p. 515).

The contemporary practice of *canto lirico*, is described by Magrini (1998) as a popular tradition, where words and music are combined spontaneously in monodic singing. *Canto lirico* appears mostly in central and southern Italy, as a symbol of local

cultural identity in celebrations and festivities. She notes that "the role of the performer's action is always more important than the immediate product, which is actually short-lived" (p. 172). One of the most typical traits of lyrical improvisation, according to Magrini, is that the improvisations are performed as interactions between several participants.

Later during the 19th century, the improvisational way of creating was criticized in England, since it was considered shallow (Esterhammer, 2008). Art was to be created in solitude, in a process over time. This might be seen as predicting a paradigm shift in Victorian England, where emotions were not to be shown in public, but experienced only on the inside. Furthermore, it forms a connection to the emergence of the work concept and the canon, as will be described below.

The masculine composer as creator

As historicism and nationalist streams started to thrive in Europe during the 19th century, musical works began to play a vital part in contributing to national heritage and identity, and manifesting respect for the past (Citron, 2000). These movements were also present in Sweden. A new gendered, patriarchal ideology developed as a patriot middle class reaction in literature and art versus the aristocratic, Gustavian ideals of the 18th century (Holmquist, 2000).

DeNora (2002), in her discussion of Beethoven's physical musical actions, makes similar claims and notes that the performing composer's manner of playing was vital in the development of gendered bodies in Romantic music performance. Before Beethoven, playing the keyboard was not gender specific in Vienna. Both female and male performers were seen as highly competent, performing music by Mozart and Eberl. However, few women performed Beethoven's music, and DeNora relates this to his musical actions at the piano, where a high technical brilliance was expressed with a physical force on the instrument. He "came to subscribe his somatic habits into his music —somatic habits that broke with prevailing conventions of a gentle, delicate, and graceful pianistic performing style and the conventional evaluative discourse used to describe that style" (p. 11). The structure of Beethoven's music, with sudden contrasts in musical gestures and moods, engaged the performer in abrupt and athletic changes, which would risk a woman's feminine decorum, especially considering the low cuts of the female fashion at the time. These performances can be seen as social events, or musical workspaces, repeated over time, where women were excluded from taking active part as performers. The

performance mode, appropriated by men over time, might be connected to the emerging concept of the male genius in music:

Chords rather than 'pearly' passage work, leaps from one range to another, double octave statements of themes, extreme dynamic contrasts, legato articulation, abrupt changes of mood or tempo, startling rhythmic figures and broken phrases, Beethoven's music called upon a pianist to engage in often abrupt, changeable and disconnected physical activities, activities that entailed and routinized suddenness of movement and surprise, movements which were the very antithesis of aristocratic corporeality and pianistic femininity but which were linked to an idea and imagery of the sublime and to an idea of the musical Genius as purveyor of that musical sublimity. That genius was masculine in conception, and Beethoven's music was hailed as possessing "an earnest, manly style". (DeNora, p. 12)

In this way, music creates social relations through segregation and difference. DeNora concludes that the Beethovenian way of performing became a codified, gendered style, as it created links between the musical and the extra-musical. The dominating male representation in this embodied musical practice over time created notions of masculinity in music composition and performance. These notions were gradually regarded as fundamental in the evaluation of musical qualities.

Beethoven's music was not merely reflective of but helped constitute gender formation during the 19th century. This is because it provided a work space in which the modern image of the active, forceful, domineering, virile and controlling male was elaborated—as the "Genius" and as the uncompromising, visceral, leonine figure (though also more high status a figure than the mere virtuoso) (pp. 31-32).

In line with this, Holmquist (2000) depicts how Romantic gender ideology merged with the conservative, bourgeois ideology and positioned women primarily as family existences, not as individuals.

The work concept and the musical canon

A regulative work concept (Goehr 2007) developed in Europe during the 19th century, where performing musicians were supposed to show loyalty to the composers by following the instructions of the score, and perform the work, as a product both of transcendent and commercial qualities. This led to a stricter hierarchy and a more subservient role of the singers and musicians, as the improvisational practice vanished: In practice this meant that fidelity towards the

score and the work became the same thing: "to be true to a work is to be true to its score" (p. 231). This is supported by Rostwall & West (2001) who claim that the work became a closed unit, not to be changed by the performers. The score soon dominated over the performance and became the main material to be evaluated as an art product outside of the physical performance context. Citron (2000) describes how this led to a division between score and performance, and how musicology, inspired by literary critics, chose to focus on formal analysis of the musical text rather than on the music as performed:

Instead of functioning as visual representations of an aural experience in time, maps to realizations of the piece, or symbols of its essence, scores are often considered first and foremost the pieces themselves. (Citron, 2000, p. 37)

The emergence of the regulative work concept and the following focus on the development of a canon of musical works has resulted in a musical culture which gives privilege to the "transcendent subjectivity" (Citron 2000, p. 119) of the composer.

New public and educational music arenas

The cultural importance of the salons diminished during the second half of the 19th century in relation to the new, autonomous aesthetics and the symphonic music (Öhrström, 1987). Success in the open market gradually became the marker of quality and professional status in the Western music field while the salon became a private arena. Citron (2000) describes how musical activities during the 19th century moved out of the courts and churches and into a commercial field, "rooted in capitalist ideals of enterprise and the market-driven economy" (p. 33) where a composer's success depended on acceptance in new public contexts such as concert series and musical reviews. The power of critique was thus transferred from a patron's oral evaluation after the performance into printed public media. Societal norms celebrated male creativity as original and considered females less able to produce artistic works. .

Public institutions such as concert halls and chamber music venues were controlled by men, just like the public music reviews replacing the musical discussions in the early 19th century salons (Öhrström, 1987, 2007). Öhrström (2007) describes a backlash during the 1890's, where also the few female artists who had managed to establish themselves lost their possibilities. This lack of public acceptance is noted by Rosenberg (2016) who claims that women through Western history have found

room for agency within the popular, non-textual performance genres rather than in institutions representing high culture.

Before 1860 several men and women attended the composition class at the Swedish Music Academy, but a few years later all the women were gone, and a small number of men were left – a reflection of the new aesthetics that required male geniuses as composers (Öhrström, 1987). Although there were a few female string musicians the string quartet was regarded as a distinguished genre, too complicated for the female brain (Öhrström, 2007). Elfrida Andrée wrote a string quartet that was rejected by male ensembles several times both in Stockholm and Gothenburg, before it was finally premiered by a quartet in a women’s festival in Copenhagen in 1895 (Selander, 2012). Öhrström notes that one reason that some female composers such as Elfrida Andrée, Valborg Aulin, Agathe Backer-Gröndahl and Helena Munktell did manage to establish themselves and their music, was the connections between the salons and the public concert arena, and the high musical quality in many of the salons. As managers of the salons, women could perform their own pieces and sometimes lead orchestras.

Improvisation as a musical practice declined among all musicians and singers except for organists and baroque musicians during the 19th century (Bailey, 1992, Johansson 2008). A canon based solely on male composers and their instrumental works was established. The repetition of standard repertoire in subsidized institutions preserves a cultural heritage of classical, canonical works (Tjäder, 2011).

Hierarchical norms for musical performance, analysis and learning

Citron (2000) describes canon as a symbol and replication of social relations, as “a template of the past and a narrative of the future” (p. 1). Creating a canon is a way of creating identity in a culture, by defining its important actors and their ideals. Canonical structures have a large impact on the development and education of musicians, since educational goals, learning theories, research conventions and teaching methods have a normative and prescriptive function:

After all, the values students internalize will underlie their professional choice of repertoire whether as a soloist, ensemble player, conductor or possibly concert manager or music journalist (Citron, 2000, p. 28).

The canon also informs audiences about what is considered to be good taste: “If the work is in the canon, assumes a layperson, it must be good and something I should

be familiar with” (p. 31). Choosing works for a canon is therefore a manifestation of power, where certain ideologies and values are represented through a certain number of works that will set the standards for others, for instance the convention of dividing music history into different eras, where certain “objective” perspectives are emphasized.

In anthologies, the choice of contents creates a normative canon in itself, since music by women and other minorities (sic!) are often overlooked. In her study of female representation in Swedish popular music during the later part of the 20th century, Selander (2012) shows how pop and rock bands have been excluded because of gender and describes this as nothing less than falsification of history. When discussing the third edition of Grout & Palisca’s *A history of Western music*, Citron (2000) claims that it is a sign of modernity’s dominant values during the 20th century that this was the first edition to include music after 1800, with its Romantic music and its traits of more feminine aspects of rhetoric and emotional processes in music. McQuillan (2000) notes that in Western philosophy, speaking has always been privileged over writing. However, when it comes to the musical canon of the 19th and 20th centuries the opposite is the case, as shown by Björk (1999) Citron (2000) and Rosenberg (2016). They state that oral-dialogical literature, music and theatre traditions in Western literature have been underprivileged compared to the written work, where the word/music is considered a manifestation of the patriarchal conventions in Western society.

The last twenty years has seen a lot of criticism of canon as a concept, which according to Citron (2000) is in reality a political process of creating values and ideology.

. ..as canonic values become entrenched over time, the prescriptive and normative powers of canons become even greater. Their tenacity and authority create the ideology that they are timeless. As such it is assumed that they do not change. Yet the main aspect of canons that tends to remain constant is the ideology itself of immutability” (Citron, 2000, s. 15).

Love (2008) argues that methods for musical analyses so far have treated music as an object, thereby forgetting “the testimony of musical experience” (p. 52) where the listener takes part of musical details in an ongoing experience, thereby not conceiving of the piece as a whole until afterwards. He claims that the objectifying tendency is derived from Kantian philosophy, where “all art works are defined as being removed from the history of ordinary life” (p. 53), and that the majority of musical analyses regard music as written text. This can be seen as a sign of how composed music has become more and more decontextualized from social processes,

in contrast to how improvisation played a more integrated part of the social interaction in the salons.

In musicology and in music psychology one can see an increasing interest in musical performance, taking off in the 1980s. This has also led to the development of “performance analysis” which, according to Bowen (1996), “includes the study of how the music sounds, but [...] also considers performance attitudes, gesture, social context, and audience response” (Bowen, 1996, p. 19). Bowen aimed for an analysis that could “demonstrate how the conventions of style and tradition make a space for further expressive freedom” to performer (p. 35). Building on these developments, John Rink (2002, 2015) proposes that a “performer’s analysis” may put a distinct focus on music’s temporal nature, focusing the physical actions and the creative role of the performer, and hence with a focus on cultural and social structure and process rather than musical structure. Arguing that “structure is relational, inferred, constructed and defined in terms of process” (2015, p. 129) and emanating from the performer’s competence Rink draws attention to prescriptive rather than descriptive analysis. Further, with the development of new musicology¹²⁵, gender studies and post-colonial theory began to reshape musicology into a more radical and critical player. Hence, it is clear that musicology can play a new role in the development of a critical culture in relation to classical music performance.

The musical canon in performance and education

As a result of the regulative work concept (Goehr, 2007), performances of Western classical music are to a great degree evaluated with regard to whether they comply with the composer’s intentions or not. As noted by Rostwall & West (2001) music of the virtuoso musicians of the late 19th century was eventually included in the canon and accordingly, technical aspects were increasingly assessed in musical performance. This led to the dominance of the *technical-instrumental approach* (Hultberg, 2000, p. 30) in Western music teaching from around 1850 up until today. In higher classical music education (HME) the text-based, canonic perspective on music and its processes of communication is still often the primary one, which means that certain, situated aesthetics are seen as having a transcendental value. This approach is also described by Reid (2000) who in an interview study identifies three

¹²⁵ New musicology developed during the last decades of the 20th century, much instigated by McClary’s (1992/2002) radical outline of gendered, semiotic structures in classical music. The research in new musicology is inspired by critical theory from fields such as cultural studies and gender studies.

approaches to how the Music Entity (p. 170) is regarded in HME. Two of these focus on music as "a combination of technical elements related to either an instrument or to musical notation" (ibid, p 170) where the goal is to learn to master music in terms of harmony, style, melody, rhythm or sound. Only one approach regards music as a tool for individual expression. Reid argues that the view on music is decisive for how the learning and performing of music is conducted. The artistic and intellectual tools that performers develop in the contemporary educational structures of Western classical music focus mainly on producing technical vocal and musical qualities, in terms of timbre and dynamic phrasing. Consequently, the teacher has a central role for conveying values on musical agency.

This is confirmed by Hultberg (2009) who presents a culture-psychological model for musical learning. Students practice music by using tools in their "cultural toolbox" ('kulturell verktygslåda', p. 56) not only for techniques but also for conventions for structuring and expressing music (p. 57). In a subproject in SOL (Students' Ownership of Learning), conducted by Johansson (2012), instrumental teachers in a performance program were interviewed. Johansson concludes that learning experiences in music often remain on an individual level, which can be seen as a characteristic trait of learning processes in a conservatoire tradition. She notes how this knowledge is a great potential for collective change and development, which often is not perceived by the teachers themselves (nor by students, my remark).

This privatised view of musicianship and teaching is coupled with the view that their individual practice is probably not interesting to anyone outside a limited and often hierarchical circle of professional colleagues. In reality, this means that the sum of personal experience remains on an individual level as a property of a genial personality, rather than as knowledge that is attainable for the collective of students, musicians and music teachers. (Johansson, 2012, s. 58).

Kvale & Nielsen (2000) describe the master/pupil system as the prevailing form of knowledge transfer within European crafts. Although Swedish music academies are regulated by the Higher Swedish Ordinance, many HME teachers in the classical field still use this teaching strategy, as noted above. The conservative hierarchies shaped by the master/pupil system are thus transferred into professional music life.

Classical singers who have shaped their instruments and artistic identities in relation to a strong, conservative performance tradition and their work with repertoire for many years have a limited agency when it comes to stage performance. As professionals, they are still often dominated by the values and opinions of teachers, conductors and directors, both regarding artistic and structural matters of music

practice. In opera productions, they enter the work process at a late stage, having completed their individual part studies under leading of a musical coach before they even meet the other singers. This affects the chance for the singers to make joint readings of the material, and, in turn, individual singers' possibilities of making independent interpretations, and developing their own artistic-musical identities.

In addition to these tools provided in HME today, other intellectual tools need to be added and developed, in order to give performers more discretionary power when it comes to artistic and ethical choice, with the goal of making creative and critical interpretations and improvisations.

In the process of problematizing conservative production models and patriarchal values that still dominate the Western art music field, improvisation has an important part to play.

Canon and improvisation: a dialogical relation

The historical examples conclude that even though improvisation has been a vital part of classical Western music performance, the development of the musical canon to a dominating degree came to shape our modern understanding of classical music and its affordances. This in turn has affected the current structures of production and reception of classical music, both in educational and professional institutions. As outlined above, classical Western music can be better understood from performance rather than score-based analysis. Such an approach promises an understanding, which is culturally and historically situated as well as grounded in the artistic practice. But these findings should not remain only within the field of research. In the light of declining audience numbers and restrained public musical funding, all actors in the music field need to reconsider the current conventions of how music is created, produced and perceived. Further, a musical practice which brings the practices of interpretation and improvisation together will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of Western classical music of the past centuries, widening the space for performer's individual creativity. Re-introducing improvisation as a perspective in classical/art music performance would allow performers to develop their creative critical thinking, and give way for a more diversified field of practice. It is my conviction that such a perspective could substantially transform the formats of HME but also have an important function in bringing about structural change and modes of communication with new audiences in the institutions of classical music in the present day.

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Singing in Action

This dissertation explores performative perspectives on classical and contemporary vocal improvisation (CCVI) as a critical, creative tool for development of and research in vocal performance. It consists of one introductory part and five articles, with additional documentation on a homepage. The artistic projects have been performed in close collaboration with fellow classically trained singers and musicians. The practice of CCVI is contextualised in relation to vocal history, opera, improvisation practice(s) and research in vocal performance. The artistic methods of opera improvisation, lyrical improvisation and CCVI without words are described in text and video. The studies performed also investigate how theoretical concepts such as performativity, action and interperformativity can be used for articulating aspects of communication, creativity and knowledge in CCVI.

Photos by (from top left): Ensembles/projects: Operaimprovisatörerna, Improve to Improve, Impromans, Audio Activists.

Martin Skoog (1), Heidi Jakkula (2), Kristofer Langerbeck (3), Klara Bodell (5), Hedvig Jalhed (6).