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The Weekend: 6

Capturing the Inherent Creative Process in Making a Jazz-infused Opera

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DMus Composition

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A full score and libretto for *The Weekend* are appended.

A video recording of the staged performance from Bloomsbury Theatre on September 26 2021 is appended and can also be viewed at <https://youtu.be/zMZI4zYIQo>. A video recording of the interim concert performance from Milton Court Concert Hall on December 20 2020 is appended and can also be viewed at <https://youtu.be/fyfrPVHS8uo>. Video examples referred to in sections 8.1 and 8.2 are appended and can also be viewed through links provided in the commentary.

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Abstract

A challenge in creating works blending jazz and opera is to integrate a musical language based on closed structural forms -- such as blues and song/tune forms using verse-chorus-bridge structures, and dances, based on repetitive rhythmic cycles -- into a longer-form, narrative formal structure. The *suite* and *stage musical* have often been the vessels of choice; the purpose of this research is to generate an original work using jazz-derived musical language in the composition of a narrative *opera*, contributing new knowledge by furthering the development of an evolving and still experimental genre of composition.

The resultant work, *The Weekend*, is an 80-minute one-act opera based on the play of the same name by Michael Palin, with a libretto by Tamsin Collison. It was produced by Highbury Opera Theatre (HOT), a community company involving professionals, amateurs, and volunteers at all stages of planning, production, and performance. The results of the research are documented in a full vocal and instrumental score, video and audio recordings, and an accompanying written commentary documenting the reflexive compositional and production process. The commentary considers the historical context for jazz-infused opera, before outlining the research methodology. The genesis of the *The Weekend* is then discussed, considering its libretto and evidencing the composition process through a series of five cases studies. The production process is then considered, including the sequence of workshops, resulting feedback, interim recording, further feedback, and final adjustments, leading to a full staging and production of the opera. A conclusion reflects on this journey, highlighting pertinent threads of the research and considering how they might contribute new knowledge to contemporary opera-making.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this research is to generate an original, through-composed theatrical work, referred to here as an opera, employing jazz-derived musical language and contributing new knowledge by furthering the development of an evolving and still experimental genre of composition.

As evidenced in the following historical context section, a challenge in employing jazz language in the composition of an opera is to integrate a musical language based on short structural forms - such as blues and song/tune forms using verse-chorus-bridge structures, and dances, based on repetitive rhythmic cycles - into a longer-form, narrative formal structure. The *suite* and *stage musical* have often been the vessels of choice; the purpose of this research is to successfully create a narrative *opera*. The resultant piece is designed to be performed by a mix of professional and amateur performers; an additional desire in this research is to ensure that the experiences and skills of performers from divergent musical backgrounds contribute to the artistic whole.

My motivation to do this is driven by personal creative impulse and further by the desire to share its creation with my community. Experience has demonstrated that arts organisations are seeking to expand their stylistic pallets and broaden their cultural reach while maintaining artistry and integrity; my belief is that modern jazz-derived language, acknowledging its rich Black heritage and multiple tributaries, can be employed to create satisfying narrative opera that retains vernacular appeal.

The resultant work, *The Weekend*, is an 80-minute one-act opera based on the play of the same name by Michael Palin, with a libretto by Tamsin Collison. It was produced by Highbury Opera Theatre (HOT), a community company involving professionals, amateurs, and volunteers at all stages of planning, production, and performance. The results of the research are documented in a full vocal and instrumental score, video and audio recordings, and an accompanying written commentary documenting the reflexive compositional and production process.

In this commentary I will consider the historical context for jazz-infused opera, before outlining my research methodology. I will then discuss the genesis of the *The Weekend*, considering its libretto and evidencing the composition process through a series of five cases studies. The production process will then be considered, including the sequence of workshops, resulting feedback, interim recording, further feedback, and final adjustments, leading to a full staging and production of the opera. A conclusion will reflect on this journey, highlighting pertinent threads of the research and considering how they might contribute new knowledge to contemporary opera-making.



2. Background

In 2017, working with the librettist Tamsin Collison, I composed *Fever Pitch the Opera* for Highbury Opera Theatre. A 90-minute piece of continuous music theatre, it is based on the book by local writer Nick Hornby and was designed for and performed by the Highbury community in which its story is based. It premiered at Union Chapel, a short walk from the Arsenal Stadium where its main action takes place, and used four professional solo singers, several amateur solo singers, adult and school-age choruses and a professional instrumental ensemble of eleven players.

As the book was a memoir rather than a story, a narrative had to be gleaned: an internal-conflict dramatic comedy set in the world of the football fan. The piece needed to accommodate a wide range of abilities and had to enthuse and engage the professional and volunteer performers, community, funders, and author as well as an audience who knew the book but may be unfamiliar with opera. It had to entertain, educate, and inspire.

My role as HOT's artistic director, in addition to writing the music, required raising funds, selecting performers, directing rehearsals, collaborating with the stage director and production team, leading educational workshops, promoting the work, and fulfilling many other responsibilities. Through the experience of creating *Fever Pitch*, I came to understand that a symbiotic relationship between the music, the text, and the individuals of the company was essential to achieve a satisfying result with a work such as *The Weekend*.

While the music of *Fever Pitch the Opera's* four acts was continuous, it incorporated a series of songs and musical sequences, akin to music theatre. My desire for *The Weekend* was to create a more organic work, a principally through-composed, narrative opera.

3. Jazz-infused Opera: Historical Context

This research is concerned directly with my personal jazz-infused musical language. While appropriating elements inherent in jazz from its emergence in Black America in the early 20th century such as swing, blues, and improvisation, it is informed by jazz's many stylistic tributaries from outside the USA, particularly Latin America and Africa, and from its absorption of harmonic practices from 20thC European music.¹ Most prominently jazz, as the term is used today, is defined by its rhythmic language, evolved from the superimposition of underlying dance patterns, generating syncopation and providing propulsion: its "swing" and "feel". Opera, traditionally associated with bel canto vocal technique, has equally evolved, adapting to the stylistic and formal structural conventions of the day. It is simply defined here as "sung-through staged narrative drama."

In this chapter, I will consider the historical context for the use of jazz language in opera, highlighting examples and trends that have provided personal inspiration.

¹ For a passionate defence by Wynton Marsalis of this type of definition for jazz, see <https://andscape.com/features/for-wynton-marsalis-forgetting-the-roots-of-jazz-is-forgetting-the-history-of-race-in-america/>. Marsalis focuses on the integration of elements from jazz's root cultures and avoids a binary choice. I have observed him repeat this in person on many occasions.

3.1. Early Initiatives: Gershwin and Ellington

A survey of jazz's interaction with opera can begin with George Gershwin's (1898-1937) *Blue Monday (Opera à la Afro-American)*, a 25-minute Harlem monodrama created in five days for George White's *Scandals* of 1922. Though it sat uncomfortably in a light music revue, the potential of incorporating jazz-derived music into a classical framework inspired Paul Whiteman to commission the composer to write *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), for his orchestra; its success "raised important questions about the possible relationship between jazz and art music."² A writer of songs for Broadway, after *Blue Monday* Gershwin began extending them into longer forms, notably in the 1931 Pulitzer Prize winning show *Of Thee I Sing* and 1933's sequel *Let 'Em Eat Cake*. According to writer Stephen Schwartz:

*"The main musical unit becomes increasingly not the song or number, but the entire scene. Music moves the drama along...This is not done through the usual 32-bar song but by a musical tapestry that slips in and out of recitative, arioso, and song. You can see...how much more sheer stuff the Gershwins contributed than is usual for a Broadway show. By the time he gets to Let 'Em Eat Cake, Gershwin has command of all the technique he needs for grand opera. It now comes down to a matter of a different kind of book."*³

The chosen book was Dubose Heyward's novel *Porgy*, set in an impoverished Negro fishing community in coastal South Carolina. Appropriating the style of blues and spirituals, in 1935 Gershwin crafted a score with a wealth of memorable songs, extended recitatives, transitions, and striking orchestral passages, lifting it from the realm of the musical theatre toward that of grand opera. Asked why he had deemed it a "folk opera", he responded:

"Porgy and Bess is a folk tale. Its people naturally would sing folk music. When I first began work on the music I decided against the use of original folk material because I wanted the music to be all of one piece. Therefore I wrote my own spirituals and folksongs. But they are real folk music - and therefore, being in operatic form, Porgy and Bess becomes a folk opera..."

Aware of the potential of the new form, and in explanation of the appropriation, he continued:

*"...However, because Porgy and Bess deals with Negro life in America it brings to the operatic form elements that have never before appeared in opera and I have adapted my method to utilize the drama, the humor, the superstition the religious fervor, the dancing and the irrepressible high spirits of the race. If, in doing this, I have created a new form, which combines opera with the theater, this new form has come quite naturally out of the material."*⁴

The reception was mixed. Composer and critic Virgil Thomson, writing for the *New York Herald-Tribune*, suggested that Gershwin's incorporation of blues and jazz influences into a "serious" operatic score to be "falsely conceived and rather clumsily executed...crooked folklore and half-way

² Mary Herron Dupree; 'Jazz, the Critics, and American Art Music in the 1920s', 1986, reprinted in *The George Gershwin Reader*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993), 126.

³ Steve Schwartz, 'Of Thee I Sing / Let 'Em Eat Cake,' *Classical Net*, 1996, <www.classical.net/music/recs/reviews/s/sny42522a.php>

⁴ George Gershwin, 'Rhapsody in Catfish Row: Mr. Gershwin Tells the Origin and Scheme for His Music in That New Folk Opera Called *Porgy and Bess*'. *New York Times*, October 20, 1935, X, 1-2

opera.”⁵ He also fueled a debate that persists to this day, criticising Gershwin for presuming to tell a “Negro”⁶ story: “folk-lore subjects recounted by an outsider are only valid as long as the folk in question is unable to speak for itself, which is certainly not true of the American Negro in 1935.”⁶

Regardless of his outsider status, Gershwin’s skill and determination made it possible for the story to be told, and further, to insist that a black cast perform it. *Porgy and Bess* is the first successful use of jazz-derived music in opera and the most performed American opera of all time. Its strength stems from the emotional power, rhythmic drive and pure quality of the music, set in a robust narrative structure. Gershwin demonstrates a feel for musical storytelling and dramatic pacing born of long stage experience.

Black composers had been speaking for themselves for some time, even when few in the opera house were taking note. Scott Joplin's opera *Treemonisha*, completed in 1911 but first heard in 1972, employed his vaunted ragtime songs and dances in a European classical framework that pre-dates jazz's emergence.⁷ A generation later, classically trained stride pianist James P. Johnson (1894-1955), one of jazz's most influential figures, worked with Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes to create the 35-minute opera *De Organizer*, performed only 3 times in 1940 until its rediscovery in 2002. Its setting shares similarities with *Porgy*:

*"The show is about a group of impoverished sharecroppers in the South whose spirits are raised when a labor organizer inspires them to join together and demand justice from their landlord...The music is a combination of jazz, swing, blues and ragtime, all set within a classical structure."*⁸

Around the same time, Duke Ellington (1899-1974), Johnson’s pianist-mentor (“*What I absorbed on that (Johnson's concert) occasion might, I think, have constituted a whole semester in a conservatory*”⁹) began planning his own opera, *Boola*. He wrote a libretto in verse¹⁰, telling the story of an African who arrives in America on a slave ship, searches for comfort in the Bible, is emancipated, and becomes a full participant in American life. Though never completed, *Boola* became the model for *Black, Brown and Beige*, his most ambitious extended instrumental work,

⁵Virgil Thomson, New York Herald-Tribune, 1935, quoted in 'Porgy and Bess, the first great American opera, premieres on Broadway,' <www.history.com/this-day-in-history/porgy-and-bess-the-first-great-american-opera-premieres-on-broadway>

⁶ Following common practice, I have chosen the word black when referring to the race. When Negro or African-American are quoted or referred to directly I have retained them.

⁷ For an in-depth discussion of *Treemonisha*'s musical structure and ethnographic placement see Luca Cerchiari, 'Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha* (1911), the 'first' black opera. A new ethnoanthropological and musicological analysis', *Musicologica, The Journal of the Department of Musicology, Comenius University*. 1/2018.

⁸Stephen Kinzer, 'From Oblivion to Ovation: An Opera Right Out of the Harlem Renaissance', *New York Times*, 28 December 2002

⁹Duke Ellington, *Music is My Mistress*, reprinted in *The Duke Ellington Reader* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993), 19.

¹⁰ In the Duke Ellington Collection at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C. there is a 39-page typescript under that name.

"planned as a tone parallel to the history of the American Negro"¹¹ and performed in Carnegie Hall in 1943.

B, B, and B at the time was the most ambitious attempt by any composer, black or white, to create a genuine symphonic-scale jazz piece. It traced in music the history of the American Negro from slavery, through emancipation, to membership in modern society over its three-movements. Only one section, *The Blues*, retained from *Boola*, was sung, and its form was not that of the traditional blues. It provides some insight into Duke's instincts as a poet and demonstrates his integration of processes more associated with classical composition, such as extension, repetition, and transformation. To me, Ellington's setting is a miniature masterpiece, highlighted by the outstanding performance of his orchestra.¹²

*The blues
The blues ain't
The blues ain't nothin'
The blues ain't nothin' but a cold gray day
And all night long it stays that way*

*'Tain't sumpin' that leaves you alone
'Tain't nothin' I want to call my own
'Tain't sumpin' with sense enough to get up and go
'Tain't nothin' like nothin' I know*

*The blues
The blues don't
The blues don't know
The blues don't know nobody as a friend
Ain't been nowhere where they're welcome back again.
Low, ugly, mean blues
The blues ain't sumpin' that you sing in rhyme
The blues ain't nothin' but a dark cloud markin' time
The blues is a one-way ticket from your love to nowhere
The blues ain't nothin' but a black crepe veil ready to wear*

*Sighin', cryin', feel most like dyin'
The blues ain't nothin'
The blues ain't
The blues*

Chastised by poor revues ("Well, I guess they didn't dig it"¹³), he never again attempted such an extended work.¹⁴ Ellington often acknowledged his respect for contemporaries in the classical world and lamented their perceived division:

¹¹ Ellington, *Music is My Mistress*, 181.

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sy3mAR2P1aY>.

¹³ quoted by Mike Levin, *Down Beat*, 1943, reprinted in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, p. 168

"In 1972, on a plane from New York to Toronto, I found myself sitting next to Duke Ellington, who spoke almost with tears in his eyes of the stature of (Constant) Lambert, admitted that he had learned from Delius and Debussy, and expressed scorn for the old musical division (between jazz and the classics), which had been almost as vicious as a colour bar."¹⁵

Black, Brown and Beige is a piece unique in jazz and is a major influence on my own work. Though composed on a large scale and almost entirely notated, its episodic structure reflects its source in a music founded in improvisation and spontaneity. It foreshadows *The Weekend* in developing a narrative structure that transcends song/tune forms and employs an eclectic range of jazz musical languages, rhythmic styles and techniques:

"Though assuming the task of telling this story has been deemed pretentious, audacious, and overly-ambitious, Ellington nevertheless succeeds. Physical labor, personal triumph, religion, and artistic creation: all are elements expressed within *Black, Brown, and Beige*; all contribute to Ellington's presentation of jazz as a narrative; and all are thoroughly discussed in musical composition. The result is a stunning auditory experience depicting the emergence of an individual identity through the struggles and triumph of the American Negro".¹⁶

3.2 Weill's Infusions

As Ellington, Gershwin and Johnson were applying their songwriting skills to longer compositions, Kurt Weill (1900-1950) was approaching a corresponding result from the opposite direction. A classically trained pupil of Humperdinck and Busoni, in Weimar Germany, Weill had written several modernist operas¹⁷, but in 1928 had also exploited the sounds of Berliner jazz cabaret in *The Threepenny Opera*, created in collaboration with writer Bertold Brecht. Arriving in America in 1935 as a refugee from Nazi Germany he found a new vehicle, the Broadway musical, for his eclectic skills. It was my immersion in this music, while conducting his Broadway shows *One Touch of Venus*, *Lady in the Dark*, *Street Scene* and *Lost in the Stars*, that encouraged me to consider writing jazz-infused works for the theatre.

The formal structuring of *The Weekend* is strongly influenced by Weill's own efforts to integrate vernacular song forms into a longer-form narrative structure in his 1941 musical comedy *Lady in the Dark*. Working with writer Moss Hart and lyricist Ira Gershwin, he invented a unique formal structure, winding four mini-operas ("dreams") around spoken scenes. In the third, the *Circus Dream*, he manages to seamlessly link a series of songs, chants, and dances into one continuous and organic 20-minute structure constructed over a secure harmonic foundation:

¹⁴ For a detailed commentary on Ellington's extended compositions see Max Harrison, 'Reflections on Ellington's Longer Works' in *A Jazz Retrospect* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles., 1976), 121-28. He and I shared many listening sessions and discussions on this topic.

¹⁵ Anthony Burgess, *Little Wilson and Big God* (London: Heinemann, 1987). 110-11

¹⁶ Sawyer A. Theriault, 'Duke Ellington's Jazz Narrative of the African-American: Black, Brown, and Beige', *Inquiries, Journal of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities*, 2011, Vol 3 No.86, 1/1

¹⁷ Upon attending a recent production of *The Silver Lake (Das Silbersee)*, written in 1933, I was struck by Weill's fluency in counterpoint, orchestration and harmony, and especially the mastery of formal construction. This was not a composer simply reliant on good tunes.

Fanfare (key of D)
Circus March, incorporating the *Greatest Show on Earth* (song in D major)
 Ringmaster's Recitative (transitional pedal point over chromatic triadic harmony)
Dance of the Tumblers (settles in D minor, then chromatic transition)
Trial Recitative (subdominant key of G minor)
Trial Chorus (waltz in relative Eb major)
Tschaikowsky (patter song, interrupted by Allegro in related G minor)
The Sage of Jenny (introduction, in modally related key of F)
The Sage of Jenny (blues-based song, in Cm, with F as subdominant)
The Sage of Jenny (ending, now in C major)
Jury Chant (chromatic transition, superimposing *My Ship* in key of F)

Weill-influenced chorus chants and refrains, structurally transitional pedal points, triadic polytonality, approaches to recitative, unapologetic arrivals of a big, bold chorus numbers and shifting between fantasy and reality are all exploited and developed in *The Weekend*.

His works demonstrate a genuine integration of jazz language rather than a mere exploitation of its sounds or accessibility. Rhythmic language is informed by genuine swing, tunes flow organically, harmony is rich, melodies illuminate the lyrics, and orchestration is as accomplished as its classical peers. Weill was the only major theatre composer of the era to orchestrate his own work.¹⁸

His later works were more traditionally operatic in form, with less spoken dialogue, and Weill himself referred to *Street Scene*, set in Harlem's cultural melting pot, as an "American opera". It employs arias and ensembles incorporating jazz, blues, popular songs and dances, with spoken dialogue, charting a middle ground between opera and music theatre. Challenging assertions about white composers setting black stories, his final work, *Lost in the Stars*, based in apartheid South Africa, made no attempt at authenticity or pastiche. He chose to use the hybrid musical language in which he was fluent while referencing African folk influences: "American spirituals are closer to African music than many people realize".¹⁹ Weill provides a model example of enriching one's musical vocabulary while retaining its central core.

The *Street Scene* aria *Lonely House* demonstrates Weill's approach to integrating jazz and operatic concepts. Blues-derived dominant 13th chords are used in a harmonic progression based on the cycle of 5ths, and its melody references both the blues scale and angular, evocative leaps. Similarly, its rhythmic language imperceptibly shifts between "straight" and "swing" feels, illuminating Elmer Rice's text - though its detailed rhythmic nuances are impossible to notate and the performers must have an internalised grasp of the rhythmic language. *Lonely House* provides a model for extending the practices of blues singing into a through-composed aria for an opera singer, a predecessor to my

¹⁸ "Mr. Weill, composer of opera in his native Germany before ever he began devoting his gifts and abilities to the American theatre, wrote every note of the score himself. If we go back to the days of Herbert and De Koven we find that this was a routine procedure, as it still is in Europe. But in this country the orchestration of musical comedy scores has become a highly specialized technique." Warren Story Smith, 'Composer, Who Contributed the Score to the Current Musical Comedy, "One Touch of Venus," Is a Refugee With Fine Record of Achievement', *Boston Sunday Post*, September 26, 1943.

¹⁹ Harry Gilroy, 'Written in the Stars,' *New York Times*, October 30, 1949.

setting of Stephen's aria in *The Weekend* (to be interrogated in Case Study no. 5). Following is a page from my notated vocal score, highlighting details of its harmonic structure and rhythmic language.

(Straight)

L'istesso tempo
with soft expression

Lone - - ly house, lone - - ly me!

Cl.

Fun-ny - - with so man-y neigh - bors, How lone - ly it can

Ob. col canto

Cor.
Vc.

be! Oh lone - ly street! Lone - - ly

Cl. I. Vl.

Vc.

(Straight)

town! Fun-ny - - you can be so lone - ly with all these folks a -

Fl. col canto

Weill's Broadway shows, like Gershwin's, were designed to appeal to a mass audience, and thrived on popular appeal. They balanced sophistication with accessibility, a shared objective for *The Weekend*. While expanding musical boundaries, they were produced in the commercial theatre as stage musicals, where they could, and did, run for hundreds of daily performances; an American opera at the Met, if it could be produced at all, would run for relatively few.

3.3 Bernstein and Sondheim

From mid-century the lines between musical theatre and opera become increasingly blurred as jazz itself developed as an art music, extending its reach through assimilation and harmonic and rhythmic development. Stage composers continued to reference it; Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990), working with lyricist Steven Sondheim (1930-2021), produced in 1957 one of the most influential pieces of music theatre in any style, *West Side Story*, featuring a latin-tinged big band jazz sound and symphonic sweep in a tightly organized formal structure. Employing a motive based on the tritone, the score has a remarkable unity as it travels through its overture, songs, extended dance sequences, interludes and even fugues. Bernstein's only opera from the period, the earlier *Trouble in Tahiti* from 1952, displays less structural unity, but includes a vocal trio singing in a jazz "scat" style; popular jazz used ironically, reflecting the sardonic theme in the story and its post-war period.

Bernstein's influence stretched across the theatre, concert hall and the jazz club. He engaged several generations through his televised *Young Person's Concerts*, was an advocate of Gershwin, Ellington, and Weill (and Schuller, see below) and encouraged his young listeners to give them the same respect he offered to Ives, Schoenberg, Mozart and Mahler. As will be noted, *The Weekend* was originally intended to be a companion piece to *Trouble in Tahiti*.

Inspired by the works of Bernstein, Weill and 1947's *Allegro* by Richard Rodgers (1902-1979) and Oscar Hammerstein II (1895-1960), composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim's works, employing an eclectic musical language incorporating elements from jazz and popular song onto those from his classical background, came to embody a new type of musical favouring theme over narrative, to be known as the "concept musical":

*"If Oscar Hammerstein taught Sondheim the basic of construction in the musical, it was (Hal) Prince who with Sondheim worked out the deconstruction of the musical, liquidating realism for a presentational style in which the audience is always to remember that it is in the theatre, that the action is not "real" but an assembly of performers who discuss the story while enacting it."*²⁰

Sondheim faced the growing issue of categorising these hybrid works:

*"Sweeney Todd has been called by people who care about categories everything from an opera to a song cycle. When pressed, I have referred to it as a dark operetta, but just as all baggage comes with labels, so do all labels come with baggage. 'Opera' implies endless stentorian singing; 'operetta' implies gleeful choirs of peasants dancing in the town square; 'opera bouffe' implies hilarious (in intent, at least) complications of mistaken identity; 'musical comedy' implies showbiz pizzazz and blindingly bright energy; 'musical play' implies musical comedy that isn't funny. For me, an opera is something that is performed in an opera house in front of an opera audience. The ambience, long with the audience's expectation, is what flavors the evening. When Porgy and Bess was performed on Broadway it was a musical; when it was performed at Glyndebourne and Covent Garden, it was an opera....Opera is defined by the eye and ear of the beholder."*²¹

²⁰ Ethan Morden, *'On Sondheim'*, New York, Oxford University Press (2016), 25.

²¹ Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf (2010), 332

3.4 Schuller and Russo

In the 1950s and 60s "jazz" music in music theatre tended to reference either swinging pop songs and dances or Black culture, both of little interest to conservative American opera companies. As in the pre-war period of Weill, and of Krenek's 1927 *Jonny Auf Spelt*²², it often fell to Europe to encourage new trends and perform new operas, and in 1966 Hamburg State Opera commissioned *The Visitation* from Gunther Schuller (1925-2015), a musical polymath who was principal horn at the Met as well as working with Gil Evans, Miles Davis, and Charles Mingus. He composed many works combining jazz and classical techniques and coined the term "third stream" to describe this new mixture:

"The die was already cast; there was no one formula at work," says Schuller of his formative observations. 'Since the ideal for me was to create an absolutely new concept of composition in which the jazz and classical would be so blended that you would not be able to identify the jazz roots from the classical roots, I approached this amalgamation process in a different way in each of my pieces.'^{23 24}

Explaining his choice in *The Visitation* to retell Kafka's *The Trial* in racist America, Schuller felt that *"if I was to use jazz at all, the Negro had to be involved."*²⁵ *Jazz as an art form - in all of its various stylistic manifestations - is the creation of the American Negro.*²⁶

And describing his approach to integrating jazz and opera:

"Jazz in my opera is a modern, partly improvised, spontaneously creative art music, measured by the same kind of rigorous, demanding disciplines and aesthetic criteria as any other art music. To put it simply: I was not interested in grafting jazz into an otherwise 'normal' contemporary opera style, much less to 'jazz up' my score with a few deft 'jazz numbers'. I was interested in a real integration of fundamental contemporary jazz and classical concepts, techniques, and idioms...Least of all do I want to sloganize the work as a jazz opera." It is an attempt - my attempt - to fuse jazz elements

²² *Jonny*, initially hugely popular but soon a victim of antisemitism and racism, was about a Negro jazz violinist. One of few exceptions that prove the rule, it was also performed at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City.

²³ Bill Shoemaker, *Jazz Times*, 1 January 2001

²⁴ Bernstein featured him and his Third Stream music in a 1964 'Jazz in the Concert Hall' Young Person's Concert: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOLejUiiVUg>

²⁵ 'The Visitation, controversial opera probes black man's dilemma', unattributed, *Ebony*, June 1968, 77.

²⁶ Gunther Schuller, *Musik im Unterricht*, 1968, reprinted in *Musings*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1986, 230.

with a contemporary (in my case) atonal, dodecaphonic language. The true jazz opera has not yet been written...The Visitation is in these respects still a hybrid "Third Stream" work.^{27 28}

At about the same time Bill Russo (1928-2003), trombonist and composer of big band pieces for the Stan Kenton orchestra, was extending his jazz writing into longer forms. In addition to creating a symphony premiered by the New York Philharmonic under Bernstein, he wrote a radio jazz opera, *The Island*, for the BBC, featuring the voice of jazz singer Cleo Laine and his own jazz orchestra (big band) with added strings. Like Ellington, his intention was to employ the big band practices in which he was skilled in setting narrative drama. Unlike Schuller's work, it is undoubtedly jazz, though the result reads as a suite of related jazz pieces, linked by static and verbose recitative.²⁹ He turned to the *Commedia dell'arte* for his later one-act chamber operas *Pedrolino's Revenge* and *Isabella's Fortune*, produced in Chicago in 1974. Like Schuller an academic as well as a practitioner, Russo's 1961 book *Composing for the Jazz Orchestra* remains an essential text on the subject and is a strong influence on my own work. The instrumental music of *The Weekend* reflects his influence, particularly in harmonization of melodic lines, chord voicing and orchestration.³⁰

3.5 Braxton, Lewis, and Davis

Black American composers continued to be interested in creating opera with jazz materials. Across Chicago from Russo, saxophonist Anthony Braxton (b.1945) was evolving from the jazz and free improvisation explorations he shared as a member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians toward an all-embracing ethos of improvisation and composition. Influenced by his study of philosophy and the work of John Cage, his work approaches contemporary European idioms from his jazz roots:

*"...his self-invented, heavily theoretical approach to playing and composing jazz has as much in common with late 20th century classical music as it does jazz, and therefore has alienated some who consider jazz a full remove from European idioms....He is able to fuse jazz's visceral components with contemporary classical music's formal and harmonic methods in an utterly unselfconscious - and therefore convincing - way."*³¹

From the 1970s Braxton began to create a series of orchestral works that led to a recent *Trillium* series of multimedia operas. More recently his AACM associate, trombonist George Lewis (b.1952), a fellow MacArthur "genius" grant recipient, premiered his opera *Afterword* at the Museum of

²⁷ *ibid.*, 230-2. He made a strong case for *The Visitation* as an important work when I consulted him in choosing an opera for inclusion in a festival of American music at London's Barbican Centre.

²⁸ An excellent documentary on Schuller's composition process in *The Weekend* can be found at <https://www.guntherschullersociety.org/films-and-docs>.

²⁹ A recording be heard at <https://seagreensingers.com/theisland>.

³⁰ Russo lived in London in the 1960s, working for the BBC, teaching at Morley College and founding the original London Jazz Orchestra. I have directed the (new) London Jazz Orchestra since 1991 and many musicians have shared with me anecdotes about his composing, directing and teaching. Kenny Wheeler, a founder member of the new LJO, studied with Russo and told me that his jazz composing sessions mostly consisted of singing and analysing Bach chorales.

³¹ Chris Kelsey, Allmusic, <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/anthony-braxton-mn0000924030/biography>.

Contemporary Art in Chicago in 2015. Based on his own book of essays on the AACM, its jazz roots are less obvious, and his libretto is more akin to a history lesson.

"I know nothing quite like this opera. The two acts, each around an hour, are grueling to listen to. The vocal lines are rarely descriptive or dramatic and can produce great tedium....It takes a long while, like learning a foreign language. You start to catch on to the gibberish. Once sensing the musicians' collective urge for something bigger than themselves — something that is, in fact, their selves — I found that not just authentic but astonishingly moving. Only when the opera was over did I feel as if I was ready to begin to hear it."^{32 33}

While appreciating Braxton and Lewis' work, as a composer I am closer to what may be termed the modern mainstream, using melodic motives, harmonic progressions, and rhythmic pulse. Anthony Davis (b.1951), a Yale-trained composer and academic who performed as a jazz pianist with both Braxton and Lewis, stays closer to the mainstream in his overtly political operas *X*, *the Life and Times of Malcolm X* (1986), *Amistad* (1997) and *Central Park Five* (2019). Jazz and blues language as well as the European models are clear in his music, obliquely referencing the sound worlds of Russo and Schuller as well as to that of *Porgy*. Not limiting himself to stories of Black experience, his operas deal with subjects including science fiction and the abduction of Patricia Hearst.

Davis, whose output includes symphonic works and Broadway scores as well as opera, is clear about the potential, and the challenge, of combining jazz and classical elements and aesthetics, particularly with regard to rhythm:

"The main stumbling block to the exploration of this kind of mixed medium is a different concept of time, of rhythm. In 'Five' and in 'X' I wrote a music that is rhythmically demanding; when you look at my music you realize that rhythm is one of the paramount things, and the idea that every player is really responsible for the time, for generating and maintaining the beat, the pulse. I think that especially in modern 20th century music we have lost the concept of the forward momentum of the music, the rhythmic momentum. I think that my experience as an improviser has given me the whole notion that rhythm and time and rhythmic language is there to give a forward motion. One of the great things I've had to do in working with the opera is that I've really had to analyze the way we approach rhythm."³⁴

Davis highlights an essential consideration when integrating jazz into a contemporary classical environment: the abilities of the performers to understand and deliver the subtleties of its rhythmic language while also rising to the potential demands of its complexity.³⁵

3.6 Recent Work

³² Mark Swed, 'Review: Elders and the next generation convene at the Ojai Music Festival,' *Los Angeles Times*, 16 June 2017.

³³ An excerpt from *Afterword* can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRjShTrq5Ls>).

³⁴ extracted from 1987 interview: 'Overtones: Anthony Davis,' <www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=57&v=P6kkRKKBZZA&feature=emb_title, 13.15>. This compelling interview, from someone with long experience, addresses the integration of jazz and contemporary music composition and performance in an enlightening and refreshingly honest way.

³⁵ Malcolm's aria, from 'X', can be heard here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8fk1SBQxXU>.

Several further examples of recent operatic work merit mention. In 2018 I attended a performance of New York composer Daniel Schnyder's (b.1961) *Yardbird*, a biopic about jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker. Schnyder's music exploits a clever conceit: Parker had reportedly wanted to study with Stravinsky. This allows the composer to create a modernist soundscape peppered with allusions to Parker's riffs and motives; well crafted, but not overtly incorporating his jazz language nor presenting the essence of musical world. Jazz here was a subject, viewed through a contemporary-classical lens, a very different approach to my own:

*"The Swiss-born Mr. Schnyder, who has won acclaim for works that combine jazz and modernist contemporary styles, knew better than to fold actual Parker compositions into his score....A problem in combining jazz and modernist idioms can be that the resulting music sounds less like a merger than a compromise."*³⁶

Operas involving jazz may satisfy not only artistic aims but also practical ones. Companies of all sizes have been searching for repertoire to engage new audiences and with which to attach associated outreach projects. In London my *Fever Pitch the Opera*, based on a popular football memoir, attracted a relatively large and principally new audience to Highbury Opera Theatre; two recent American operas similarly use the subject of baseball to reach new audiences. Daniel Sonenberg's *The Summer King*, telling the story of Negro Baseball League star Josh Gibson, was Pittsburgh Opera's first-ever world premier; it subsequently travelled to Detroit's Michigan Opera Theatre, where an associated outreach project was entitled *Take Me Out to the Opera*.³⁷ Sasha Matson's *Cooperstown: a Jazz Opera in Nine Innings* used five solo singers and a jazz quintet with a 1950s sound. In reality a jazz song-cycle, it begs the often-discussed question of what defines opera: *"to be clear, to call Sasha Matson's Cooperstown a 'jazz opera' or an opera in any traditional sense of the word is quite a stretch"*.^{38 39}

The trends toward jazz in opera continue to cross racial boundaries. In summer of 2019, as *Central Park Five* opened in California, two more operas employing black casts opened in America. *Blue*, a gospel-tinged tragedy by Jeanine Tesori (b.1961), composer of musicals *Fun Home* and *Caroline, or Change*, and librettist Tazewell Thompson (b.1948), premiered at the *Glimmerglass Festival*. *Fire Shut Up In My Bones*, by jazz trumpeter and film composer Terence Blanchard (b.1962), opened in St. Louis, his second for them after 2013's *Champion*. Tesori has since become one of the first female composers commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera, and *Fire's* success saw it become the first opera by a black composer ever performed there, in the 2021-2022 season. For James Robinson, Opera St. Louis' artistic director, it fulfils an outreach brief:

"A lot of these are gateway operas, for people who have never seen opera before," said Mr. Robinson, also the director of a production of 'Porgy and Bess' that will open the Metropolitan Opera's season in September. 'The old idea was get them hooked on 'Madame Butterfly,' and then

³⁶ Anthony Tomassini, 'Review: 'Charlie Parker's Yardbird' Uses Opera to Tell a Jazz Story,' *New York Times*, 3 April 2016.

³⁷ Erica Hobbs, 'Take Me Out to the Opera: Exploring the role of arts and sports in social equity and inclusion,' *Detroit Free Press*, 11 December 2019.

³⁸ John Sunnier, 'SASHA MATSON: Cooperstown (Jazz Opera in Nine Innings),' *Audiophile Audition*, 7 October 2015, <www.audaud.com/sasha-matson-cooperstown-jazz-opera-in-nine-innings-julie-adams-daniel-favela-carin-gilfry-rod-gilfry-daniel-montenegro-vocalsjazz-ens-sasha-matson-albany-2-cds/>.

³⁹ I've experienced this. *Fever Pitch* was reviewed both as "the future of opera" and "not an opera".

*you'll get them for life. I was never a firm believer in that. I thought, Why not try to hook them on something new, more resonant, and then see how they like classic rep"?*⁴⁰

In relation to this historical survey, my practice in *The Weekend* follows more in the lineage of Weill and Bernstein, who create extended forms using jazz language and materials, than Schuller and Schnyder, who insert jazz materials into a contemporary classical framework. *The Weekend* is driven by a story-based, witty libretto, and exploits conversational melodies anchored in harmonic, melodic and rhythmic structures. Designed to engage a culturally broad audience, it requires little preconditioning to the worlds of opera or jazz while yet following many of their conventions.

4. Research Methodology

The research is embedded in the processes involved in creating the piece itself, and the work itself is the main outcome. Through considering an analysis of the composition process alongside that of bringing it to production, it is hoped to define an all-embracing working method contributing to further development of the genre. To this end a continual process of self-reflection was augmented by reflective feedback from composer colleagues, the librettist, director and the performers. This cycle of reflection and action was significantly aided by interim stages in the production and rehearsal process, including workshops and a video recorded concert performance of the first complete draft of the piece.

Composition of *The Weekend* followed a cyclical process of research, reflection, and action, inspired directly from the libretto. Each note responds to the ones from which it follows, and each phrase or gesture colours the preceding one, creating a temporal (time-dependent) formal, architectural structure. The music's ongoing melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic language provides the context within which these processes take place and a reference for their comprehension. This process will be discussed in chapters six and seven.

The process of creation was also shaped by extra-musical factors including performing resources, budget, venue, duration limitations, technical abilities, social and educational objectives, performer personalities, and makeup and expectations of the prospective audience, all of which were reflected upon and responded to. Rather than limiting the work, these factors directly contributed to the composition process. As will be documented in chapter eight, an extended workshop and rehearsal process proved a valuable research tool, generating feedback and engendering a cycle of creation, observation, reflection, and modification.

⁴⁰ Michael Cooper, 'This Summer, Opera Grapples With Race,' *New York Times*, 30 May 2019.

5. Genesis of *The Weekend*

September 2017	Performances of <i>Fever Pitch</i> attended by Michael Palin
March 2018	Collison, Stroman and Palin meet to plot <i>The Weekend</i> as an opera
April 2018	HOT agrees to produce <i>The Weekend</i> in a double bill with <i>Trouble in Tahiti</i>
October 2018	Composition begins
January 2019	First sketches workshopped with lead singers at Guildhall School
February 2019	Funding unsuccessful for <i>Trouble in Tahiti / The Weekend</i> double bill
August 2019	<i>The Weekend</i> planned as an evening-length opera
December 2019	Scenes 1,2 and part of scene 3 completed in draft
January 2020	Cast and chorus workshop
February 2020	Seed funding secured, performances scheduled for September 2020
March 2020	September performances in Union Chapel cancelled due to pandemic
April 2020	Scenes 4 and 5 left incomplete
June 2020	Streamed stage performance planned for December 2020
September 2020	Cast and chorus rehearsals begin, live and online via zoom, as allowed
October 2020	Vocal score completed
November 2020	Full score completed
December 2020	Videod concert performance at Milton Court Concert Hall
January 2021	Edited video of concert performance delivered
February-April 2021	Score and libretto reviewed and revised
April 2021	Meeting with Palin inspires major revision of Scene 5
June 2021	Lockdown lifted, performances scheduled for September 2021
August 2021	Live socially distanced stage rehearsals begin
September 2021	Staged performances of <i>The Weekend</i> at Bloomsbury Theatre
January 2022	Edited video of staged performance delivered

The genesis of *The Weekend* as an opera began when I read Michael Palin's published *Diaries*.⁴¹ Having long admired the surreal humour of Monty Python, I was attracted by his honesty, humanity and acerbic wit and related to him as an artist who engaged with the local community.

The *Diaries* referred to his play *The Weekend*, which drew some inspiration from his own life, and which had received a modest response when premiered in 1994. Searching for a text on which to

⁴¹ <https://www.themichaelpalin.com/my_diaries/write_it_down/>

compose an opera for Highbury Opera Theatre (HOT), the play caught my imagination, and I hoped that librettist Tamsin Collison would share my enthusiasm, and that Palin might be attracted by the idea of giving the play additional life.

The Weekend is a situation comedy of manners focusing on Stephen, a disaffected retiree whose calm weekend is ruined by the visit of his daughter Diana, son-in law Alan, granddaughter Charlotte, and their dog Pippa. It is further disrupted by an unwanted dinner party hosted by his long-suffering wife, Ginny. Adding insult to injury, he discovers that his best friend Duff, a county councillor, has deceived him, his daughter's marriage is on the rocks, the friend's wife may be having an affair with a visiting podiatrist, the dog has crapped on his tie...and most importantly, Stephen himself is harbouring a secret, key to his erratic behaviour and foul mood. The play climaxes at the boozy party, leading to a revelation and reckoning.

Several things suggested its transformation into opera that would suit HOT and my compositional aims. It was a comedy with a dark undertone ripe for exploitation through musical means, including my jazz-derived polytonal harmonic language. It had the correct scope and size that could be represented in a modest chamber opera, requiring little in sets and costumes and suiting the environs of Union Chapel, HOT's resident venue. Adrian Thompson, for whom I had created the lead role in my youth opera *Fables*, was available and ideal to play Stephen, and the story required only a small number of professional actors. It had potential for a *coup de théâtre* in the party scene. Though the author was well known, the play was not - an advantage, I felt - and Tamsin and I had previously experienced transforming another local writer's work, Nick Hornby's memoir *Fever Pitch*, into a stage work for HOT.

The opportunity to produce it came with Bernstein's centenary in 2018, where it could be paired with *Trouble in Tahiti*, also a jazz-infused domestic comedy-drama. Collison agreed to write the libretto, and Palin gave his approval and support after attending a performance of *Fever Pitch*. A key decision, taken in agreement with the author, was to expand the play's dinner party to a cocktail party, allowing for a chorus who would both take part in the action and function as a Greek chorus, breaking the fourth wall and dialoguing with Stephen's thoughts. This would provide a framing device for the piece as well as an opportunity for amateur participation.

Funding issues drove the next major artistic decision. HOT was unsuccessful in its initial bid for funding for the double bill, prompting the production to be delayed beyond the Bernstein centenary and resulting in a programming rethink. Without the Bernstein connection, the HOT committee desired to promote a single, larger work and asked us to consider expanding *The Weekend* to an evening-length piece. We agreed, setting out to create an 80-minute opera to be presented without interval. Partial funding was secured and HOT scheduled four performances in Union Chapel between 9-13 September 2020. Rehearsals were scheduled to begin in summer 2020.

Due to the pandemic lockdowns beginning in March 2020, these performances were cancelled, and no live rehearsals could be held until autumn. HOT next endeavoured to produce a streamed, socially distanced stage production from Milton Court Concert Hall at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in December 2020, rehearsing from September 2020 online, over zoom, and in person when permitted. The challenge posed by limited live rehearsal and in creating a socially distanced staging forced this to become a videoed concert performance -- disappointing at the time but providing an important interim stage and a resource from which to glean feedback. Collison and I were able to share the recording with trusted colleagues and Palin, all who contributed advice resulting in revisions and improvements. When the lockdown was lifted in June 2021, the detailed musical preparation made for the recording meant that HOT could move quickly to stage rehearsals and produce the fully staged show at the Bloomsbury Theatre in September 2021.

6. The Libretto

Collison and I had developed an effective working relationship over three previous projects: she advised me on the script for my musical version of *As You Like It*, contributed original material for my youth opera *Fables*, and wrote the libretto for *Fever Pitch*. Her experience and skills as a writer and director complement my own, and as a singer herself she understands the requirements of a libretto. She allows me to use her words flexibly and to add, extend and edit them as the music dictates; in turn I attempt to set each word while allowing the music to overrule where necessary.

Though set in a specific place and time, I chose to avoid obvious cultural references in the musical language (except at a few choice points for comedic affect), making choices based on the rhythm and pacing of the text itself. As a piece that does not reference Black or other cultures directly, the libretto's "jazz approach" was simply to be free to be spontaneous, employing rhythm and rhyme while allowing for the music to respond and define its own parameters as it progressed. Our previous experiences in jazz-infused settings of Shakespeare and in *Fever Pitch* had shown this to be an effective practice.

Meeting regularly from early 2018, Collison and I agreed basic principles and began to create a formal structure for the libretto. It would concentrate on the central plot of the play and be pithy but trim, providing space for music's dramatic role, and would represent the voice of its author⁴² though rarely quoting the play verbatim. It would be witty, constructed of both of prose and rhyme, and would gravitate between reality and fantasy. The fourth wall would be regularly broken, and it would employ a Greek chorus who would interact with Stephen and later join onstage in the action. Every word of the libretto would be heard and understood by the audience. Palin contributed his personal insights at a productive meeting in March 2018, offering his support while insisting we have *carte blanche*; we could return to him for input and approval as necessary.

Together Collison and I chose the play's salient dramatic moments and drafted a formal structure, initially for a 50-minute opera to pair with *Trouble in Tahiti*. Secondary characters were removed and stretches of spoken drama that served to provide context in the play were discarded, to be replaced by musical characterization and the input of the observant Greek chorus. Over the following year, as the libretto was expanded to an evening-length work and the music imposed its own structures, it coalesced into a final scenario:

⁴²During this time, I read further writings by Palin and his associates for inspiration. In addition to the three volumes of *Diaries*, these include his novel *The Truth*, nonfiction book *The Erebus*, several *Ripping Yarn* scripts, recent memoirs by Eric Idle and John Cleese, Spike Milligan's war memoirs, and *The Pythons' Autobiography by the Pythons*. Tamsin and I also listened to Palin's performance as Stephen in a BBC radio production of *The Weekend*.

Overture/opening

Scene 1

Introduction and scene setting, argument about Alan
Duff visits
Ginny disclosure of Bridgit-podiatrist (Hugh) affair to Stephen
Stephen fantasizes about Ginny flirting with Hugh

Scene 2

Arrival of Diana, Alan, Charlotte and dog
Alan bores with story of journey
Preparation for party
Diana discloses upcoming separation from Alan
Alan discloses news of disruptive traffic bypass to unaware Stephen
Stephen left in doubt about Duff

Scene 3

Guests arrive
Duff, Brigitte and Hugh arrive
Stephen confronts Duff
Hugh boasts while women swoon – fantasy number
Stephen embarrassingly explodes, revealing Bridget/Hugh affair
Guests leave

Scene 4

Stephen and Ginny talk
Ginny leaves
Alan returns, discloses multiple affairs to Stephen
Stephen assaults Alan
Ginny and Diana enter and break up fight
Ginny and Diana sing lamenting duet

Scene 5

Ginny confronts Stephen
Stephen's aria, confessing personal failures, alcoholism, suicide attempt
Ginny responds
Air is cleared
Morning music
Brighter Ginny enters
Ginny catches Diana and family sneaking away
Stephen arrives in changed, lighter mood
Charlotte, Alan and Diana argue
Ginny and Stephen calmly observe
Diana thanks Stephen
Diana and family depart
Ginny and Stephen reflect on marriage

Postlogue - concluding chorale

The libretto went through ten complete drafts and dozens of smaller revisions. Upon reception I would work through each draft, noting potential edits and sketching short musical ideas that it inspired, initially attempting to set each word of the libretto as received. Once a section of musical setting was properly underway, a structural harmonic framework would often emerge, generating its own pattern of tension and resolution and requiring the text to suit. I would then scan ahead, and with the harmonic framework in my ear, select and edit the text from the libretto, sharing my suggested edits with the librettist. An example passage from draft 10 follows:

STEPHEN comes to and tops up his glass from the bottle in his other hand. He sways and his moves are noticeably unsteady. He is clearly very drunk by now. His mood is turning ugly.

STEPHEN: So you've finally
Torn yourself away
From the marvellous
Dr. Hugh?

GINNY: Why must you always
Be ~~mean and~~ unkind?
He's a pleasant man.
With a clever mind
We had an interesting conversation
~~And~~ He's invited me for a consultation.

STEPHEN: He's what?

GINNY: He says I've got delicate arches
He says they need exercise.
He says I should go up to Harley Street
Where he can transform my feet.

STEPHEN: Right before my very eyes!
Do you think I'm blind?
~~I saw you!~~

GINNY: He's invited you, ~~too~~ as well.

STEPHEN: ~~Don't give me that.~~
You were all over him, ~~like a~~
the smarmy little bastard!

GINNY: (interrupting) I was talking to Di in the garden.

STEPHEN: Oh, well, I beg your pardon!

GINNY: (interrupting) Di's leaving Alan.

STEPHEN: (wrongfooted) What? When? Why?

GINNY: Apparently,
He's been cheating on her
Since the marriage started
She's just found out
She's broken-hearted.

STEPHEN (bitterly): And once again
I'm the last to know.
~~There's a bloody~~ Now that's a surprise!
~~Well,~~ I'm sick of being sidelined

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Commented [SS64]: added

Commented [65]:

Commented [SS66]: from the play

Commented [SS67]: possibly add--from earlier draft NO--do not use

Commented [SS68]: moved to Scene 2--not needed

In this passage I have edited the received text to fit with an exact reprise of music appearing earlier in the scene, required to balance the scene's architectural structure – something the librettist could not anticipate. To fit the music some lines have been cut, some moved, and in one case, extracted verbatim from the original play and inserted to suit (Ex. 1).

Ex. 1

$\text{♩} = 120$

Stephen *mp*
So you've fi-n'ly torn your-self a way from the mar-v'ulous Doc-tor Hugh?

Ginny *mf*
Why must you al-ways be un-kind? He's a plea-sant man with a cle-ver mind.

Ginny *mp*
We had an in-ter-est-ing con-ver-sa-tion, and

Ginny *rit.* $\text{♩} = 88$
he's in-vit-ed me for a con-sul-ta-tion. *mp* He

Stephen *mf*
He's what?

Ginny *rit.* $\text{♩} = 120$
says I should go up to Har-ley Street, where he can trans-form my feet.

Stephen *mf*
Right be-

$\text{♩} = 120$

Ginny *mp* He's in - vit - ed you as well.

Stephen fore my ve - ry eyes! Do you think I'm blind? You

mf *mp*

Stephen *mf* were all o-ver him! The smar my lit -tle-bas-tard! *mf* And once a-gain I am the last to know; now *rit.*

mf

$\text{♩} = 92$

Stephen that's a sur - prise! I'm sick of be - ing side -

Stephen *rit.* lined and brushed a - side, un - der - mined, mor - ti - fied.

The music for this passage, generated from a tone row, will be additionally considered in Case Study No. 4.

Creating the libretto for the final part of Scene 5, the ending of the opera, was particularly challenging. In the play it was a relatively long and verbose scene with a somewhat downbeat ending; Palin felt that this left one feeling unsatisfied. He suggested that we provide a more optimistic ending, a challenge as the previous section contained the story's real climax. We agreed that this would be principally achieved through music, with limited dialogue, resulting in a dramatically shorter scene. It would become an optimistic, reflective 'postlude', thus acknowledging Stephen's confessional aria in the previous scene as the emotional climax of the story. As will be shown, the interim recording demonstrated that this solution was too short and flippant, calling for more of the activity from the original play to be reinstated in the final draft.

7. The Composition Process

Upon receiving the first libretto drafts I began drafting musical sections quickly, improvising vocally with some piano support. The libretto's mixture of prose and poetry, incorporating a generous amount of rhyme, contains an inherent rhythm and pacing that inspired the rhythmic values and melodic contours of the sung lines. As previously noted, I tried to set every word, reorganising or editing the text as necessary.

Reflecting on my working method, I observe a process which naturally infuses the opera with jazz language. As a jazz performer myself, I am proficient in its musical language, and though designed for operatic voices, the melodies that I organically create contain contours and phrasing that naturally reflect the melodic language of jazz. Regardless of how they develop, they must feel natural and uncontrived for me to include them.

I have observed that I place myself as the character when composing, *delivering* the text and music myself. This helps me to regulate the dramatic pacing and to strike a balance between sections of the text *defining* the musical structure and it being superimposed onto set (song or harmonically defined) forms - analogous to a stream flowing into circular eddies before breaking free and continuing its progress. Further, I am aware that unlike a playwright or librettist the *delivery* of the lines is up to the composer more than the performer, who is the mouthpiece - particularly telling in comedy, where timing and inflection are as important as the material itself.

7.1 Vocal Writing

It was a priority for the vocal writing to allow all the singers, professional and amateur, to contribute from their strengths. Trained opera singers can project a full, clear sound over an ensemble, can sing music incorporating sophisticated melodic and harmonic detail, and can characterize musically while acting. *The Weekend* simply required them to have excellent fundamental musical skills, including good rhythmic security and an awareness of the grooves and feels supporting them; they did not especially need to *generate* these grooves as they were provided by the instrumental ensemble. The characters could then be given appropriate musical materials: Stephen often with disjunct lines, Ginny with lyrical, diatonic melodies, Alan with jerky, declamatory phrases, and Diana with the most introspective music.

The chorus writing required music suited to amateur choral singers: repeated refrains, chants, interjections, and chorales. When singing over a complex rhythmic feel, their lines were most often in unison or octaves (see Case Study 2), when singing simpler rhythms, they were often able to handle more complex, chromatic harmony, as in Ex. 2 below.

Ex. 2

Five P. M., Not e-nough time to walk the house, pop the wineglass-es,
warm the beer, po-lish the corks, feed the snacks, Hoo-ver the par-ty clothes,

One of the most interesting approaches taken in the libretto suggested differing roles for the soloists and chorus. Long passages of dialogue in the play were replaced by short, pointed musical dialogue between Stephen and the chorus, representing his subconscious or alter ego. This conceit was a feature of the opera and regularly exploited, in the tango opening Scene One, the fantasy scene at the end of Scene One, and a recurring exchange which appears at the end of Scene Two and reappears in Scene Three (see also Case Study 4 below). The chorus sings material that is choral and chant-like against Stephen's questioning interjections (Ex. 3).

CHORUS: A road through Canfield, the 4-6-0,

STEPHEN (*to CHORUS*): It's quite ridiculous!

CHORUS: The council rejected it months ago.

STEPHEN: I know! I know!

CHORUS: If there were another bid you'd hear?

STEPHEN: That's right. Shall I ask him tonight?

CHORUS: Don't look at us.
We can't give anything away.
Wait and see what
Duff has got to say.

Ex. 3

Chorus

♩=132

A road through Can - field, the 4 - 6 - 0,

Stephen

It's quite ri - di - cu - lous!

Ch

the coun - cil re - jec - ted it months a - go,

Stephen

I know! I know!

Ch

If there were a - no - ther bid, you'd hear?

7.2 Case Study 1 - Scene 1

Initially assuming that *The Weekend* would be paired with *Trouble in Tahiti*⁴³, I began by setting the chorus' opening words, "Welcome to Number 5, Japonica Drive, home to the middle-brow, middle-class, middle-of-the-road Stephen and Virginia Febble!", and the first unsettling exchange between Stephen and Ginny, outlining the premise of the story.

The uncertainty of what was to come suggested halting allusions to waltz and tango, and an undefined harmonic sound using open 5ths, 4ths and tritones, with chromatic wobbly harmony set over an A pedal--with one satirical diversion to F major similar to that used by Stravinsky in the Concerto in D for strings (bar 23 below). The unfocussed chromatic decoration leads to a satirical musical quote in bars 36 and 37 to deflate Stephen's pomposity - and perhaps that of that of the opera generally. Its "Tristan" chord is also common in jazz as a rootless altered dominant of uncertain key, thus bluntly referencing both jazz and operatic conventions and creating an opportunity to swivel toward jazz. Providing Stephen's response "this weekend?" with a G root determined that the key centre of the following tango, an instinctive choice, would be C minor. Working this way helped the piece's structure to organically proceed (Ex.4).

⁴³ At this point *The Weekend* was still conceived as the 2nd half of a double bill with *Tahiti*. My instinct was to think of them as two sides of a coin, with the sound world of *Tahiti* providing a starting point for *The Weekend* and the two shows sharing the same actors.

Ex.4

$\text{♩} = 112$

Chorus

Wel-come to num-ber five Ja-po-ni-ca Drive, home to the mid-dle brow, mid-dle class, mid dle of the road,

9 **Waltz**

Ste phen and Vir-gin - ia Feb-ble!

16 **Ginny:**

Al - right, Dar-ling, Bye! Love-ly.

25 **A**

Is - n't that won-der-ful. They're

33 **rit.**

com-ing down for the week-end af-ter all...

Stephen:

This week-end?

As previously noted, this launched instinctively into a tango, reflecting what is soon apparent, a constant state of tension - a tussle of wills - between Stephen and Ginny. Like much Latin American music, tango has enriched the language of jazz while continuing as a classical practice. It suited the instrumental ensemble I had chosen for *The Weekend*, based on an ensemble reduction of *Tahiti*,

itself based on Stravinsky's *Soldier's Tale* (and also used in my companion piece for it, *Fables*): violin, double bass, trumpet, trombone, flute/tenor saxophone, clarinet/bass clarinet/alto saxophone, guitar and percussion. *Stravinsky's* two tangos in the *Soldier's Tale* were points of reference, and the ensemble's leader, violinist Lucy Waterhouse, was a seasoned tango performer.

The text suggested a repeated dance-like refrain, sung by the chorus, interspersed with contrasting recitatives from the leads. This called for harmonic sequences on which I could superimpose the melodies; for the refrain I composed a tango-inspired chord sequence based on minor 6th chords moving in 3rds, over which a sweeping melody was set (Ex. 5). Chord symbols are shown for analysis.

Ex. 5

The musical score for Ex. 5 is presented in three systems. The first system shows the Chorus (soprano and bass staves) and piano accompaniment (treble and bass staves). The Chorus begins with the lyrics "Their daughter and their son" and "(Stephen:) Son-in-law!". The piano accompaniment features a sequence of chords: $A\flat m^6$, $E\flat/E$, and $E\flat 7\flat 9$. The second system shows the Chorus continuing with "are coming for the week-end with their daughter and the dog." The piano accompaniment continues with chords: $F\sharp m^7$, B^{13} , $F^{13}\sharp 9$, E^Δ , and $G^7+\flat 9$.

For interspersed recitatives I created a new chord sequence, inspired by the harmony of John Coltrane and Bill Evans: G min6 - Bb7b5 - Ebmaj7 - Ab9b5 - Gmaj7 (shown in Ex.6 below). Added to the chord sequence for the tango, I had already accumulated a significant amount of harmonic material that could be extended and developed throughout the opera. The nature of both sequences is that they are open-ended - not limited to a closed song or dance form - and easily extended.

Ex. 6

Freely ♩=78

Ginny: What are you do-ing, Step-phen? Was that Duff I saw?

Stephen: No-thing, Dear, just sort-ing it out in here. Sure, came to ask if they could bring an ex-tra

Rubato ♩=68

Stephen: Ah... the fa-mous Hugh; poor Duff, poor Duff.

guest to-night; some bloke called Be dales... poor Duff? poor Duff?

Following is the manuscript draft of the previous section, showing how the initial chord sequence is extended and developed (it is labelled "Scene 2" but became the 2nd section of Scene 1 when the opera was extended. It was written quickly and spontaneously, drawing from the two chord sequences, and only the melody and chord symbols are initially notated, to be fleshed out later. This is an example of a section composed at the piano using my voice to generate the melodies over a chord sequence, but retaining the ability to adjust the harmonies to suit (Ex. 7)

Ex.8

Ginny: It's our
 Stephen: I don't see why we have to do this, ... why you have to put us through this,
 Chorus: turn to host. Right,
 And it was cock-tails or a bridge night.

Chords: Bmaj7(#11), Bb+7(#9), Amaj7, Ab7(#9), Ab7(#9)

7.3 Case Study 2 - Scene 3

The next section of text received was the cocktail party which opens scene 3. In this scene the villagers gossip fervently about local news that is dull and mundane to the observer, calling for satire. It suggested music that was pointlessly exotic; I chose to reprise the sound of the *phrygian natural 3* chord that had appeared in bar 25 of Ex. 1 and its associated harmonic minor scale. The rhythmically displaced, syncopated accompaniment provided an unstable platform for the chorus to sing their predictable melody and mundane lyrics (Ex. 9).

Ex. 9

Piano: $\text{♩} = 132$, *mf*
 Chorus: *f* It's a plea-sant e vent at the Feb - bles,

A contrasting sequence using polytonality, based on ascending upper structure major triads over a chromatically descending bass (D/Eb - E/D - F/Db - G/C - G/Ab - A/G - Bb/Gb - C/F - C/Db), was introduced to set what might be thought of as verses (see Ex. 10 below). This sequence bridges the gap between functional (descending bass, dominant/tonic) and non-functional (chord colour) modal harmony. From this point polytonality, which creates a harmonic undercurrent that can deftly illuminate or contradict text, would become predominate as an important harmonic tool.

Ex. 10

The musical score for Ex. 10 consists of four systems, each with a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "So have you heard the ru - mour? Does a - ny - bo - dy know who's grown the fat - test mar - row for the ag - ri - cul - ture show? How to pic - kle wal - nuts so they don't rot in the jar? Where to send do - na - tions for the Au - gust church ba - zaar?" The score includes dynamic markings such as *mp* and *f*, and a *rit.* instruction. The piano accompaniment features a chromatically descending bass line and ascending upper structure major triads.

7.4 Case Study 3 - Opening

Next, an overture/opening suggested itself. I imagine *The Weekend* as referencing expressionism in its extended reality (also suggesting set and staging ideas). While previously working on the opening scene I had tried another way of setting the chorus' words, as a linearly contrived and harmonically skewed circus march. Though the words were discarded, I retained the music for an opener, in the tradition of Weill's *Circus Dream* and Cole Porter's *Another Opening of Another Show* from *Kiss Me, Kate*. The circus sound inspired the use of upper structure triads, a feature of the polytonal harmony to follow (Ex. 11). This music was later developed into a fantasy sequence to close scene 1.⁴⁴

Ex. 11

The musical score for Ex. 11 is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 1-5) includes a Piano part with a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 132$, a Trumpet (Tpt.) part, a Trombone (Tbn.) part, and a Violin (Violin) part. The second system (measures 6-9) continues the Piano, Tpt., and Tbn. parts. The third system (measures 10-13) includes the Piano, Tpt., Tbn., and Violin parts, with a *Sim.* (Sforzando) marking above the Piano part in measure 10. The score is written in 4/4 time and features complex, polytonal harmonic structures.

⁴⁴ See appended score, bars 318-381

7.5 Case Study 4 - Scenes 3, 4 and 5

Scenes 1 and 2 were relatively light in tone and the situation comedy apparently obvious: a disaffected and grumpy Stephen reacting to the surrounding irritation, with little apparent undercurrent. In the central party scene 3, emotions would be heightened as the stakes grew: a lecherous podiatrist appears, threatening his marriage and manhood, his daughter and son-in-law prepare to divorce, and his best friend is found to have deceived him, leading to an alcohol-fueled outburst. This was to be a stand-alone scene at the centre of the opera and a new and flexible melodic and harmonic resource was needed to deepen the drama. To maintain the organic nature of the opera, the resource needed to be developed from existing material.

The scene divided into several sections: the initial party music discussed above, a totally unrelated central expressionist dream/fantasy, Stephen's outburst and breakdown, and two key sections of dialogue where Stephen confronted his friend and his wife Ginny. Developing the confrontational music was the key; it was also later transformed into a duet sung by Ginny and daughter Diana in scene 4 and the postlude chorale that closed the show. To generate a large amount of flexible material, I took an existing ostinato sung by the chorus when representing Stephen's inner doubts at the end of scene 2 - constructed of two triads a tritone apart - and extended it into a tone row. The manuscript sheet below (Ex. 12) generated all the necessary material from its free development.

Ex.12

The image shows a handwritten musical manuscript on aged, slightly torn paper. At the top left, it is labeled "Scene 3 pg 24/25/26". The manuscript consists of several staves of music, heavily annotated with handwritten notes, circled phrases, and arrows. A large, hand-drawn circle is prominent in the lower-middle section, containing a diagram of musical intervals or chords. The notes are dense and appear to be a mix of musical notation and descriptive text. The paper is laid on a wooden surface.

The row, shown at the top of the page above, generated inversion, retrograde and retrograde inversion forms which were freely used. It was also harmonised with polytonality, using upper structure major triads in first inversion and quartal triads over bass pedals and lines derived from the row.

The music first appears as a series of floating chords based on the row's inversion, signaling a transformation from the real to the surreal. After the chorus, once again a Greek chorus, voices Stephen's inner suspicions, he restates the row's inversion as his first probing question (Ex. 13).

Ex. 13

The musical score for Ex. 13 is divided into several sections:

- Top Section:** Features a vocal line for Stephen with the lyrics "Top-up?". The piano accompaniment consists of floating chords. Tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 128$.
- Middle Section:** Features a vocal line for Duff with the lyrics "Well, I hav- n't...". The piano accompaniment continues with floating chords. A *rit.* marking is present.
- Bottom Section:** Features a vocal line for Stephen with the lyrics "So, is there a - ny-thing you want to". The piano accompaniment includes a Chorus part with lyrics "On the lo - cal coun - cil, aim-ing for the Chair,". Tempo is marked as *Freely, Quicker* with $\text{♩} = 80$. Dynamic markings include *mp* and *f*.
- Final Section:** Features a vocal line for Duff with the lyrics "tell me, Mate?" and "What a - bout?". The piano accompaniment continues with floating chords. A *rit.* marking is present.

Confrontational dialogue between Stephen and Duff continues, using the row and its permutations over an ostinato figure derived from the diminished scale, also suggested by the two major triads a tritone apart which generated the row.

After the interruption of the central fantasy section, the same music returns, setting the argument now taken up by Stephen with his wife Ginny. Ginny uses the original row, while Stephen uses the inversion. The pedal ostinato heightens the tension, and the exchange culminates in a polytonal harmonisation of the inversion (Ex.9). The language of the row - its arpeggiated melodic motives and clear internal harmonic sections - allows the singers to sing comfortably and dramatically (Ex. 14).

Ex. 14

The musical score for Ex. 14 is divided into three systems. The first system features Ginny's vocal line and piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 120$. Ginny's lyrics are: "You're star-ing in - to space with that scowl u-pon your face." The piano accompaniment consists of a steady eighth-note ostinato in the left hand and a more melodic line in the right hand. The second system features Stephen's vocal line and piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 88$. Stephen's lyrics are: "Please don't be so rude; come pass 'round the food. Oh, no, my dear, this dog will have its day; it's time for me to have my say." The piano accompaniment continues with the ostinato, and the right hand features a more complex, arpeggiated melodic line. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (*mp*, *mf*), articulation (*rit.*), and time signature changes (4/4, 5/4, 3/4, 7/8).

The row also was used to allude to the tension in both Ginny and her daughter Diana's marriages, re-emerging in Scene 4 when the two women sing a duet lamenting their dilemmas. Following the only stand-alone song in the show comes a harmonically transitional moment, leading from the row's serial sounds toward a jazz chord sequence. The row's melody is harmonised freely with polychords created from a condensed version of the row, giving it a totally different character and connecting with the previous song's modern jazz harmonic language (Ex 15).

Ex. 15

Freely ♩=66

Diana: *mp*

For bet-ter or for worse - a mi - so - gi - nist trap;

once the man you loved starts gi - ving you crap.

A co - ward who has got the nerve to walk out on a home that

he does not de - serve.

p C/B \flat B/G C/B \flat D/G

C/B \flat D($\flat 9$)/G E $\flat 9$ /D \flat

F \sharp /E B/G E $\flat 9$ /A \flat B \flat maj7 D \flat /A \flat E/C \sharp F \sharp ($\flat 6$)/E D \sharp /B

G/B \flat E \flat /D \flat C($\flat 9$)/G F($\flat 9$)/B \flat B \flat /B

Having represented the story's conflicts and dilemmas, the row is transformed in a postlude chorale, sung by the whole company. Though generated polytonally, the harmony is softened by voicings derived from chord scales and upper structure triads, bridging the gap between serial music and modern jazz (Ex 16).

Ex. 16

A Tempo ♩=60 *mp*

mp The sun will rise on Mon-day's bright-er skies, and

each new week leads to a - no-ther week-end. An emp-ty stage, a brand new page, a

chance to try a - gain. So, here's to next week - end.

rit.

7.6 Case Study 5 - Scene 5

Steven's climactic aria in scene 5 (Ex. 17 below) provides a case study in a through-composed aria by fusing jazz practices with opera. Had it been intended for jazz performers, it would be notated as a lead sheet, displaying only the melody and associated harmonies plus any essential rhythmic or accompanying material. I chose to notate it completely for the singer and instrumentalists, leaving only the drums to improvise, and providing chord symbols for the guitarist and bassist to allow them to vary from the written part if desired.

Jazz tunes are generally set in a single rhythmic style, or feel, that the performers recognise, and the first words of the text generated the triple meter of the aria. As it progressed, it generated intricate variations in rhythmic language, duple-meter deviations occurring throughout, in quavers (bar 7), semiquavers (13) and double-time feel swing (21-25). In an improvised setting a jazz musician would recognise these and respond accordingly; in this setting they are notated as accurately as possible, still requiring the musicians to use their personal experience to perform them with the correct feel.

The melodic language of the aria reflects the storytelling traditions of balladeers, using a simple motive that travels through the song's episodic story and which they can personalise. The motive, based on two notes a tone apart, carries the text more-or-less throughout, with only a few dramatic deviations. Its interest is primarily rhythmic rather than melodic, highlighting the narrative in the text. As such it is rhythmically highly detailed, as is the ensemble's notated accompaniment, particularly important while guiding an opera singer into the world of the jazz ballad.

The formal structure of the aria is underpinned by a relatively complex harmonic foundation, employing a series of sequences and devices. The first few bars (bars 1-4) re-establish the bass pattern (I - III - bVI - bII - I), used previously in scene 1 (Ex. 3), now employing more evasive polytonal harmonies. This bass pattern regularly reappears, each time with varying chord qualities suggested by the text: bars 9-11 use a version of it in a minor key, and bars 16-17 in an altered major version. This device alludes to the "eddy" analogy presented earlier, underpinning the storytelling.

To provide brief points of harmonic repose and introspection, upper structures are moved chromatically over pedal points: in bars 4-6, G# minor and G# major triads gravitate before moving to Eb major - all over an E pedal - before progressing. A related gesture, at double the harmonic rhythm, occurs over a C pedal in bar 7.

As it settles into its central narrative in bars 17-25, the harmonic rhythm is lengthened, now using movement in descending 3rds (Bmaj7 - G7#11 - D/Eb - Bb/C - Db/A). The specific harmonies were chosen to colour the melody, created first. Bmaj7 can be understood as C#/B; in bars 17-26 the primary note in each melodic phrase becomes the member of an upper-structure triad, and two choices are to be made: which triad to select, and which descending 3rd - major or minor - to use in the bass. The qualities of the resulting chords guide the decisions, generating a non-functional sequence that is progressed through the relative colours of the chords (bright - tense - more tense - partially resolved - tense - partially resolved) and the melodic travel of the bass, which ultimately breaks the cycle by arriving by a tone on the starting note B, now transformed into a resting mixolydian (A/B) from its initial lydian.

This system of jazz modal harmony, influenced by the music of composers including Ravel, Bartok and Stravinsky, evolved through the work of Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Ralph Towner, Kenny Wheeler and others. As quantified by George Russell in *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization* and Ron Miller in *Modal Jazz Composition and Harmony*, it is used in some form in most of my compositions.

Ex. 17

In Tempo ♩=54

Stephen

mp

It be-gan as a young man, first in my fa - mi - ly to make u - ni - ver - si - ty.

mp

E♭/E F♯/G D/C F7(♯11) E⁶ Em⁶

5

Felt like an im - pos - ter in that weal - thy and en - ti - tled

E⁶ Em⁶ E♭/E G7+ Cm⁶ Cm(maj7) Cm⁶ Cm(maj7)

8

crowd. Drank to keep up, drank to keep in,

F9(♯11) Fm(maj7) G/Ab D♭maj7 F/G♭

11

took my de - gree in a haze of gin. Got a job in a com - pa - ny with a

Fm(maj7) *mf* B♭7(♯11) *mp* D♭/E♭ D/Ab

14 boss who'd been at Tri-ni-ty; 15 16 Fell in love, got mar-ried, set-tled

Chords: Eb/Db, E/F#, Bmaj7(#11), D+7, Gmaj7, Cmaj7

17 down. 18 19 Quicker ♩ = 66 20 But e-ven with so much to lose I

Chords: Bmaj7, G7(#11)

21 could-n't quit the booze, 22 23 pissed at lunch-time, 24 drunk by three, the

Chords: D/Eb, Bb/C, Db/A

25 boss got cross and 26 sum - moned me. The

Chords: A/B

8. The Production Process

8.1 Initial workshops

For a company such as HOT which operates primarily on good will, it is crucial that everyone is enthused through the rehearsal and production process; the amateurs donate their time with personal satisfaction as their only compensation, and professionals similarly work for discounted fees. It is important that the material inspires in them a positive response, and that its challenges are achievable.

To gather early feedback on my initially composed sections - two from scene 1 and one from scene 3 - three workshops for cast and chorus were held, the most significant, as previously noted in the timeline, on 11 January 2020, when the majority of the chorus and the two principal singers were present. In addition to contributing to team building, it produced some very fruitful results, contributing directly to the ongoing composition of the opera:

1. The material felt organic, natural, and quick to learn for all. The goal of the morning session, dedicated to scene 1, was to get a feel for the structure of the story and its music while internalising as much as possible. While the principals worked from scores, the chorus learned by rote, singing initially in unison, and adding harmonic detail as able while maintaining pace and direction. These video clips demonstrate the process, the ease of learning, and the fun and engagement of the singers: I am conducting and Tamsin, the librettist, is at my right, inputting where desired: <https://youtu.be/7d6nfGxpbS0> and <https://youtu.be/k230lvtnVOU>

2. Feedback from all involved reinforced our own assessment that the dramatic pacing of the material and its associated music was effective, memorable, and easy to comprehend. This passage from scene 1 was learned very quickly, as the dramatic content flowed naturally between soloists and chorus: <https://youtu.be/rwrBUDijNtA>

3. The morning session finished with a start-stop run-through of the first raft of a large chunk of scene 1. This 16-minute clip, in addition to demonstrating the speed of learning, provides feedback as to the effectiveness of the dramatic pacing and musical structure of the scene. The response was positive; one can sense the enthusiasm and satisfaction of all as the clip finishes around 15.00. This session provided essential feedback that was applied in completing the scene: <https://youtu.be/Fo2hwm4YOZA>

4. The vocal writing for soloists and chorus were effective overall, and suggestions from the soloists and Tamsin were welcomed and incorporated. When scores were introduced for a more complex chorus section from scene 3 the response from the singers - amateur though quite experienced - was equally positive, and the music effective: <https://youtu.be/Cw1lzm2e3SE>

5. The day finished with the chorus only, trying out a section of scene 1, the "arrival music " of which I was unsure; it was developed from a previously composed sketch, and I was uncertain how comfortably it would fit into the scene and how challenging it would be to learn. It worked well and was surprisingly enjoyable for the chorus to learn, considering that it was melodically based on tritones, used displaced rhythmic figures, and was learned late in the day. Listening to an audio clip of the last few minutes, one can hear the engagement of the singers, their enjoyment of the comedy, and sense everyone's satisfaction as the day's work ends: <https://youtu.be/quzsXCLMirc>

8.2 Feedback and interim recording

The enthusiasm which I experienced as the result of the workshops was dampened in March 2020 as the UK went into pandemic lockdown. No rehearsals could be held or planned, and the performances scheduled for September 2020 in Union Chapel were cancelled. As noted in the timeline, my composing virtually came to a halt; I simply was not inspired to continue without a result to aim for and a deadline. When it became possible to stage a single live-streamed and recorded performance in December 2020 from Milton Court Concert Hall, enthusiasm returned, and I resumed composing.

This galvanised the company to prepare for the streamed performance. As live rehearsals were limited by intermittent lockdowns, music rehearsals were often held online, a process which provided little opportunity for me to receive feedback; they primarily consisted of me, the music director as well as the composer, teaching the material to cast members as they attended from home. To aid learning, I created computer-generated audio rehearsal tracks as well as an audio mock-up of each scene to provide an overview of the show and to present to the eventual stage director.

Completing the composing was not an easy process. The process of extending the original one-act libretto to five acts resulted in Tamsin struggling with the final act, which when completed we both felt was unsatisfactory. We worked together unsuccessfully to solve this problem into the Autumn, settling on a resolution on the final date which would allow me to complete the music and for the cast to learn it in time for the performance.

When composing I concentrated on the basic structure of the opera - its form, melodies, and harmonic structure - providing limited notes as to its instrumental orchestration. Composers Malcolm Singer and Mark Anthony Turnage offered advice; Singer with the vocal characterization and Turnage with the formal structure. Turnage also dismissed any potential concern that the music was too exposed or naïve, and discouraged me from obscuring its melodic and harmonic clarity with additional musical layers. Both were sympathetic to my working method of developing a complete skeletal structure before adding further contrapuntal material and orchestrating.

In summer 2020, while composing scenes 4 and 5, I began orchestrating, completing the full orchestration in November in time to prepare materials for the December recording. Lucy Waterhouse, HOT's leader and solo violinist for *The Weekend*, spent several hours with me trialing sketches for the instrumental parts, providing essential feedback. As the violin writing was particularly important, she made many suggestions ultimately benefitting the instrumental writing.

During a government sanctioned break in the lockdown allowing for live, socially distanced gathering, HOT rehearsed and produced the concert recording of *The Weekend*, in essence a recorded *sitzprobe* providing an important interim goal for all the performers, most which had not performed in any capacity for 9 months. In addition to a perceivable morale boost, it resulted in the whole company, including its supporting committee and creative team, having a much clearer understanding of the entirety of the show, very useful in preparing a future stage production. It also produced a quality recording which the company could use for promotion and with which Tamsin, Michael and I could evaluate the opera: <https://youtu.be/fyfrPVHS8uo>

The video recording provided a valuable tool for critical self-reflection, resulting in numerous improvements. Though seemingly modest, they proved critical to the piece's success:



1. Small but significant improvements to improve the delivery of the text were made at several points by lengthening note values or inserting one or more beats of rest. In the phrase sung by Ginny at 1:52 in the recording (bar 65) two beats of rest were later inserted before "after all" (Ex. 18); at 7:24 (bar 213) the word "quite", sung by Duff, was extended by a beat, in both cases increasing dramatic impact. On a larger scale, an entire 'verse' was removed from the chorus' party music in scene 3 (bar 840) as the structure felt lopsided and the music redundant, something not apparent until review.

Ex. 18

They're com-ing down for the week-end af-ter all. They're com-ing down for the week-end af-ter all.

2. The tessitura of some of the solo vocal parts was improved. Though the female leads were both mezzo sopranos, they were of different ages and their vocal ranges had different strong and weak areas, sometimes concerning only a very few notes. While mixing the recording I found that some of the phrases I had written for Ginny sounded weaker than expected and difficult to project over even light orchestration. I subsequently reviewed the entire part with the singer, where necessary changing the tessitura of affected phrases without altering their melodic shape or harmonic definition. Examples are at 3:34 (bars 110-111) (Ex. 19), and 5:16 (bar 152) where her phrases were rewritten at a higher pitch level. See before and after video examples:

<https://youtu.be/2OtHp4Rxgg4>, <https://youtu.be/ph3bHLMoc3E>

Ex. 19

Don't be sil-ly, dar-ling, there's no-thing left to see. Don't be sil-ly, dar-ling, there's no-thing left to see.

I also lowered a few strident high notes and phrases for the male singers, notably for Steven at 1:04:46 (bar 1761), compensating by rescoring the accompaniment (Ex. 20):

https://youtu.be/v6sujPz_UoE, <https://youtu.be/WEa1Ag5q9rM>

Ex. 20

The image shows two systems of musical notation. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The lyrics are "took my de-gree in a haze of gin." The piano part features chords and a melodic line in the bass. The second system includes a dynamic marking of *mf* (mezzo-forte).

3. Detailed changes were made to the orchestration, the most significant being the addition of a cello to the ensemble. Mark Anthony Turnage, who reviewed the recording and score with me, suggested that this would provide more depth to the sound, an additional lyrical voice, a partner for the violin, and another low voice option, releasing the double bass for other duties. It was also clear that the flute was sometimes written in weak ranges - particularly in scene 5, where, used as the lead voice in closely-harmonised passages, it could not have simply been placed an octave higher or assigned to another instrumental voice. The solution was to adapt the part for soprano saxophone, played by the same player, providing a more characterful lead and adding impact to the whole scene.

4. Scene 5, the emotion climax of the piece, was unsatisfactory. There were two structural problems, unsettling the dramatic pacing: Steven's emotional outburst in his aria was too tame, and the consequential feeling of release in the ending section of the opera too light, temporally and emotionally; it was in danger of coming across as rushed and trite after such a long and measured build-up.

Palin's observations upon reviewing the recording proved helpful in solving the first of these problems, leading to a total review of scene 5. In the aria, I had miscalculated in removing a few lines of Steven's text in the libretto, just prior to his disclosure of his attempted suicide, rather skating through the passage (1.05:35 - 1.06:48) (Ex. 21a): <https://youtu.be/LK-youfauGw>

Ex. 21a

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system is marked "Freely ♩=52" and includes the lyrics "I could kiss good-bye to a-ny no-tion of pro-mo-tion." The piano accompaniment features chords labeled E/C and Cm(b6). The second system is marked "Flexible ♩=54" and includes the lyrics "Tried to end it on a bridge... could - n't do it to the kids,". The piano accompaniment features chords labeled Dm(maj7) and Bb/C.

Palin instinctively felt that this passage needed to be more direct and personal, the seriousness of the confession less tempered by it being disclosed in a song. Restoring the discarded lines allowed the singer time and space to build tension (using a rare diversion from the two-note motive), heightening the drama in the storytelling, and created an opportunity to provide music to rhythmically disrupt the flow and to increase the harmonic tension and colour (Ex. 21b): <https://youtu.be/ASO2YptJUhU>

Ex. 21b

Freely ♩=52

I could kiss good - bye to a - ny no - tion of pro - mo - tion. Dis -

E/C Cm(b6)/Eb E/C Cm(b6) E/C Cm(b6)

Flexible ♩=54

gust - ed by my own dis - grace, I hit the pub, got shit - faced. Tried to

F7(#11) Bb+7

end it on a bridge, could - n't do it to you and the kids.

Dm(maj7) Cm11

In other places I lengthened note values and inserted rest beats to improve the dramatic pacing and highlight words. I also rescored the aria, improving the orchestration, adding detail to the rhythmic language, and removed the improvised solo flugelhorn, which I had imagined would enhance the spontaneity of the narrative but tended to make the music sound casual. These improvements allowed for the singer to produce a much better dramatic flow, as witnessed by the transformed performance when later staged.

5. It was clear to me that I had underwritten the end section of the final scene 5, the 'morning after' music, a return to tango. To structure this section, I had composed a repetitive harmonic sequence that when constantly transposed would underpin the entire scene and had set the text above it. I felt that the basic music was sound and wished to retain it, but it was too short and lacked a satisfying point of arrival, emerging uncomfortably into the final, more reflective music that I used to end the scene. This felt unjustified as not enough action had taken place in either the libretto or the music, leaving the following postlude chorale feeling hollow: https://youtu.be/PDmmNg4_Bpc

The solution was to return to Palin's play, with me taking the lead in adapting and setting the text. I inserted a dramatic interaction within the (now departing) members of Diana's family arguing amongst themselves, observed by the now tranquil and transformed Stephen and Ginny. This provided the dramatic focus and structural material needed to extend the scene, supplied needed drama and comedy, and focused the story back on to its original protagonists. It also allowed a welcome return to the tango music and words of scene 1, satisfyingly rounding off both the scene and the opera: <https://youtu.be/EsBJYt9LThA>

6. Tamsin and I were unsatisfied with the lyrics in the closing chorale, as was Palin. He felt that they were too obvious and preachy, and suggested focusing on the events just witnessed, finishing with the word 'weekend'. As the music had previously featured in the scene 4 duet between Ginny and Diana reflecting on the nature of marriage, a solution was to adapt it for Ginny and Stephen, reflecting on their marital journey and inviting the whole company to share in the conclusion:

POSTLOGUE (original)

DIANA: You move along, keep calm and carry on
GINNY: And you may find the world is brighter tomorrow
STEPHEN: The sun will rise on bluer skies
ALAN: You'll see through clearer eyes
All 4: Keep calm and carry on.

ALAN: For life is a turning wheel
STEPHEN: And life sometimes strikes a blow
DIANA: But love helps a sore heart heal
GINNY: And love never lets you go

ALL w/CHORUS: Love makes us strong
So smile and carry on
For we can always make a new start tomorrow
Forget the past, forgive at last
Accept what's done is done
Keep calm and carry on.

POSTLOGUE (final)

GINNY: You promise to love
STEPHEN: through good times and bad.
BOTH: When we were first married what good times we had.
STEPHEN: You try to be a family,
GINNY: share happiness and strife;
BOTH: building a life.

GINNY: So if things...
STEPHEN: We'll fix it and go on,...
GINNY: ...aren't quite comfortable now,
STEPHEN: ...we'll get by somehow...
GINNY: ...we can't just give up on them;
STEPHEN: ...We're in this together;
BOTH: We made a vow.

ALL w/CHORUS: The sun will shine on Monday's brighter skies
and each new day leads to another weekend.
An empty stage, a brand-new page, a chance to try again.
So, here's to next weekend.

8.3 Staging and Production

Following the lifting of the government-imposed lockdown, *The Weekend* entered a 3-week period of music and stage rehearsals leading to four performances September 23-25, 2021. As the initial draft of the music had been learned and tested through the recording the previous December, alterations and additions, distributed to the performers in advance, were easily incorporated, and scores were rarely used.

The recording also provided an invaluable reference for the creative team, led by the director John Ramster, to conceive the staging and a useful tool for myself and Tamsin to share with them our conception of the opera. Ramster, whose experience as an opera director was principally with professionals and advanced students, expressed concerns that the amateur chorus members would be able to act professionally, required to prepare the work in a relatively short time and under social distancing protocols. His concerns were dispelled in the first rehearsal; as they were all members of a choir they were disciplined, experienced, and organised in working under the protocols. They knew the music well, from memory, and understood the story clearly, meaning that he could immediately concentrate on dramatic and staging requirements.

From this point my role was that of musical director, ceding artistic control to the stage director. As composer, I sanctioned minor adjustments to tempo, dynamics, etc., but no further alterations, additions, or deletions were required or requested. The director adapted his vision to the existing score, illuminating its dramatic conceits through the staging.

Due to the social distancing requirements, there was less stage movement than I had imagined, and no dancing. It was not missed, regardless of the restrictions. The skills of the director were focussed on choreographing intimate stage movements, on the dramatic performances of the soloists, and on the reactions of the participants in the chorus, who were on stage in four of the five scenes. This kept the primary focus on the music, and it was personally satisfying to observe that the music seemed able to successfully carry the narrative with only light choreography.

The Weekend was designed to require modest resources, with the action taking place in one location and needing little in the way of sets and props. Accompanied by a 9-piece instrumental ensemble, it is designed to be flexible and practical to tour. It proved to be so; the director chose not to have a set at all, using props and lighting to define the location. The ensemble (which does not include piano) fit comfortably into a small orchestra pit; in a different venue it could conceivably be placed at the side or rear of the stage.

Despite only one day allowed for stage and technical rehearsals, the company transferred to the venue relatively effortlessly. As the recording in December had included the ensemble, it was not difficult for the singers to adapt to the requirements of performing with them when they were introduced in the theatre. Sound reinforcement was sparingly used, the soloists using head microphones, the chorus from overhead microphones, with the ensemble unamplified. As the show had been designed for unamplified performance and prepared acoustically, the performers were principally in control of the balance; reinforcement was only required to maintain that balance when compromised by variety in vocal strength and by stage positioning.

The performance may be seen at <https://youtu.be/zMZl4zYlQo>.

9. Conclusions - Jazz-infused Opera

Compared to the great number of stage musicals appropriating aspects of jazz - perhaps best described as jazzy - with the exception of *Porgy and Bess*, until recently there have been relatively few performances of pieces deemed operas with significant jazz content. Perhaps this is unsurprising; jazzy musicals thrive on song and dance forms, while an opera requires longer formal structures to support its narrative, a skill less often employed in jazz composition. Audiences have little experience of jazz-infused operas, and performance opportunities have been limited for works transgressing traditional boundaries, and for Black artists in particular. Things are changing, however, represented by current programming at the Met, where composers such as Terence Blanchard, Jeanine Tesori, and Andrew Davis, grounded in the language of jazz and the formal structures of classical music, have been provided performance opportunities for their operas.

My goals were more modest in scale, if not in quality. As described in the introduction, the purpose of this research is to generate an original work using my jazz-derived musical language in the composition of an opera, contributing new knowledge by furthering the development of this evolving and still experimental genre of composition, and to share the result with my community.

The Weekend is the result of this research. Applying and extending the techniques of my jazz-infused language to an operatic convention produced the desired outcome: a piece with its own inherent language, a clear and organic narrative, and a secure architectural structure. Unlike some of the examples noted in the historical context chapter, the resultant work is not an 'opera with jazz', a 'jazz opera', a 'folk opera' or a 'musical comedy' but is a sung-through staged narrative drama - by my own definition, simply an opera - in a musical language incorporating conventions from numerous sources: classical, folk, and jazz. Its rigor in harmonic and motivic development allows it to transcend the closed forms associated with jazz and contribute to a satisfying formal structure.

The piece was conceived for performers with a range of abilities and backgrounds, and a key conclusion is that writing to their performing strengths contributed to the success of the composition. The correct alignment in making *The Weekend* was for jazz to contribute to the operatic convention rather than the other way around, hence *jazz infused*. One cannot expect opera-trained singers or even experienced amateur choral singers to be proficient in jazz, but they can be expected to have excellent rhythmic and ensemble skills, an appreciation of the jazz elements, and an ability to stylistically adapt to the grooves it employs. The swing and groove that they were required to provide was no more than one might expect from the characters themselves, and the musical setting encouraged them to sing in a familiar way rather than require a type of sound that they may not be proficient in producing. They were enthused by their achievement in adapting their accrued skills to musical settings that they recognised but may have not had an opportunity to perform.

Conversely, the instrumental music required players who were highly experienced in both jazz and classical music. Several soloists were required to improvise over chord sequences, the 'rhythm section' had licence to decorate and improvise as desired, and the whole band had to groove and swing in a range of jazz-related styles. Notation can only allude to the details of 'feel', 'groove', and 'swing'; success required selecting instrumentalists possessing nuanced rhythmic skills gleaned through jazz experience well as those employed in contemporary chamber music.

The result of the research is *The Weekend*, and it will be judged solely on its own merits. My hope is that capturing and defining the process of its creation contributes to the further development of, and provides inspiration for, the composition of further operatic works that are jazz-infused, however they may be labelled.

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