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ON POLITICAL AUDIENCES: AN ARGUMENT IN FAVOUR OF PREACHING TO THE CHOIR

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Abstract: A critique of politically engaged art is that gallery-dwellers, concert-goers and theatre-lovers share the same political inclination as the artists. Often known as 'preaching to the choir', the critique holds that art's power to challenge and persuade is rendered valueless when it is experienced only by people who already hold the same (typically leftist) ideas. In this article I suggest three distinct yet interconnected responses to this critique: namely, 'expanding', 'galvanising' and 'activating' the choir. In the first part I explore 'expanding' and 'galvanising' through works by Stefan Prins, Sarah Nicolls, Pamela Z and Soosan Lolavar. In the second half I discuss how I 'activate' the choir in my own work.

The remit of this article is limited in a number of meaningful ways. It discusses only pieces by composers who work within the context of new music, although my observations on the politics of audience–piece relations might be applicable to other contexts. Secondly, while artists' intentions have come to mean less in political analysis, this article is concerned with them. I believe that all art is political and that there are therefore many ways to investigate a piece's political impact: its reception, the political ideals it knowingly or unknowingly replicates, the socio-economic realities that it embodies, the identities it represents, and so forth.[1] This article, however, focuses on the compositional intentions of political musical works. My interest is in exploring how those intentions can be read as strategies and tactics for politically engaging with an audience. The article is therefore concerned with works that are explicitly defined by a political subject matter. It gravitates away from purely instrumental music and toward pieces that employ devices such as text, theatre, video and concept to frame their audience's experience around a political issue. I believe analysing such works is fruitful for exploring piece–audience relations as a tool for political change. Finally, I do not aim to sketch a complete taxonomy of piece–audience relationships for politically engaged art.

[1] See for example: Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, eds., *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Ruth HaCohen and Yaron Ezrahi, *Composing Power, Singing Freedom: Overt and Covert Links Between Music and Politics in the West* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Jerusalem and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2017).

Rather, I want to lay out coordinates for mapping the relationship as a way of thinking through the 'preaching to the choir' critique and political activism in art more broadly.

To critique an artwork as 'preaching to the choir' is to say the work has no political value as it only reaches an audience that already agrees with its political message. Such scepticism has a long history, dating back at least to Rousseau's 1758 *Letter to M. D'Alembert*.[2] The text makes philosophical and sociological arguments against the idea that theatre can improve the moral standing of its audience. Its philosophical argument is that theatre involves passions but not reason. Theatre can depict the different moral natures of characters, but it cannot influence its audience to sympathise with the characters who hold the better morals. Rousseau asserts that we can only see the virtues and vices in theatre in the same way that we would see them in life. If, for example, an audience member is not offended by greediness when they meet it in everyday life, they will have the same reaction to it when they see it on stage. He writes: 'an ugly face does not seem ugly to him who wears it'.[3] Art is always perceived from within a political disposition and cannot change minds. This argument is echoed in the writings of critics of politically engaged art such as Sartre, Adorno, and Rancière.[4]

Rousseau claims that even if a writer 'shocks these maxims [of morals] he would write a very fine play to which no one will come'.[5] That is, even if art had the capacity to change minds, audiences do not want this and would avoid or reject such a play. For Rousseau this is because audiences go to the theatre to be entertained, not to be taught a lesson. The 'preaching to the choir' critique often follows these lines, arguing that leftist art is encountered in an echo chamber by liberal or progressive middle-class audiences. Such perspectives have been developed by sociologists such as Bourdieau, Denisoff and Peterson,[6] and have been the cause of some of my late-night panic attacks, and perhaps yours as well.

These arguments have been addressed, formed, questioned and defended for centuries but it is not the purpose of this article to review this discourse. I consider the choir critique not as the end of the conversation but as its beginning. My objective is to think through the critique and draw out some of the ways in which it can inform the practice and theorisation of politically engaged music.

[2] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: A Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre*, trans. Allan Bloom (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959).

[3] Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts*, p. 26.

[4] Adorno writes 'Sartre's frank doubt whether Guernica "won a single supporter for the Spanish cause" certainly also applies to Brecht's didactic drama. Scarcely anyone needs to be taught the fabula docet to be extracted from it – that there is injustice in the world; . . . the trappings of epic drama recall the American phrase "preaching to the converted"'. See Theodor Adorno, 'On Commitment', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Francis McDonagh, ed. Frederic Jameson (London: Verso, 2007 [1961]), p. 185. Rancière, when stating his objection to politically engaged art, cites Rousseau's letter. Jacques Rancière, 'The Paradoxes of Political Art', in *Dissensus – on Politics and Esthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corocan (London: Continuum International Press, 2010), p. 136.

[5] Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts*, p. 21.

[6] Bourdieu most notably in Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984 [1979]). See also Serge Denisoff, 'Protest Songs: Those of the Top Forty and Those of the Street', *American Quarterly*, 22/4 (1970), pp. 807–23, and Richard A. Peterson, 'Understanding Audience Segmentation: From Elite and Mass to Omnivore and Univore', *Poetics*, 21 (1992), pp. 243–58.

'Expanding' and 'Galvanising'

One response to the critique that politically engaged art is valueless, because it only reaches a convinced audience, is to change the audience, expanding the reach of the artwork beyond the like-minded, 'expanding the choir'. In her *Thoughts on the Audience* Martha Rosler suggests artists have the agency to influence the constitution of their audience, but that unfortunately most artists are passive on this front.[7] This passivity, Rosler argues, is built into an artworld system that values commodification and does not motivate artists to communicate with diverse audiences.

According to Rosler, the audience is not simply a function of 'who is out there' but should be paired with 'whom you want to reach'.[8] She calls for interventions into the artworld structure, challenging how, why, when, by whom and where art is created and exhibited. Rosler points out that the capitalist framework in which art is produced, viewed and commodified has a huge impact on the formation of the audience, and she argues for alternatives to mainstream exhibition spaces, run by artists and communities. Artists' agency over their audience, however, is not limited to the context in which their art is viewed but also resides in artists' choice of content, form and type of piece.[9]

Rosler's focus is on visual art but these points ring true for new music. In the UK there are indeed institutional attempts in this direction such as the network of joint amateur and professional ensembles, Contemporary Music for All, and the Eavesdropping Series, that amplifies the voices of female-identifying music creators. 'Expanding' the choir as a compositional tactic within individual works might include a decision about genre – calling a piece an opera or a musical for example – as well as choices of subject matter, themes, styles, forms, accessibility and location.

The second response to the 'preaching to the choir' critique is 'galvanising'. The choir critique holds that politically engaged art has no value because its audience already agrees with the political message. But anyone who has worked in a choir knows that a choir actually needs some preaching in order to sing powerfully and harmoniously: in the same way, a political artwork can have value when it serves to galvanise a like-minded community. In a TV interview Dr Martin Luther King Junior said of civil rights movement freedom songs that they:

> serve to give unity to a movement, and there have been those moments when disunity could have occurred if it had not been for the unifying force of freedom songs and the great spirituals. The Movement has also been carried on by these songs because they have a tendency to give courage and vigor to carry on. There are so many difficult moments when individuals falter and would almost give up in despair. These freedom songs have a way of giving new courage and new vigor to face the problems and difficulties ahead.[10]

The role music played in the civil rights movement has been well documented and theorised.[11] Similarly, protest songs were central

[7] Martha Rosler, 'Lookers, Buyers, Dealers and Makers: Thoughts on Audience', in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 9–52.
[8] Rosler, 'Lookers, Buyers, Dealers and Makers', p. 28.
[9] Rosler, 'Lookers, Buyers, Dealers and Makers'.
[10] As quoted in Denisoff, 'Protest Songs', p. 243.
[11] See for example Bernice Johnson Reagon, 'Let the Church Sing "Freedom"', *Black Music Research Journal*, 7 (1987): pp. 105–18; Kerran L. Sanger, *'When the Spirit Says Sing!': The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995).

to the American anti-Vietnam war movement in the 1960s,[12] and there are countless other more recent examples, from the contemporary Palestinian alternative pop scene,[13] to Mexican rap.[14] While protest and freedom songs are obvious examples,[15] works from other art forms can also galvanise communities. When asked about the purpose of his films in a Q&A session, documentary filmmaker Avi Mugrahbi replied that every community, including a political one, needs its art.[16] He explained that while he does not think his movies will change minds, he believes they serve a purpose by strengthening the spirit of the community of people who share his views.

Artworks can galvanise political communities in different forms and also in different ways.[17] Some artworks unify and strengthen a political community by lifting spirits, others by educating and questioning assumptions. Some lead the group to cry together and others to laugh. In a musical context participatory singing is a common device, as with protest songs, but it is not the only one.[18] Pieces that highlight a specific political issue in order to stimulate reflections and discussions can also be seen as 'galvanising' and will be discussed below. 'Galvanising the choir' is used in a wide sense to indicate a piece's political potential in acting within a political community to reinforce it. 'Galvanising', then, is not an attempt to attract new participants to the cause but rather serves to consolidate, inform and strengthen the resolve of a community or movement.

In Practice

The concepts of 'expanding' and 'galvanising' provide useful frameworks for speculating on the political nature and value of political new music pieces. While it is impossible to calculate a piece's impact, reading artworks through the political relationship they construct with their audience can shed light on almost all aspects of these pieces: from musical language and dramatic structure, to the spaces where they are performed and their receptions. I begin with Stefan Prins's *Generation Kill* (2012) and Sarah Nicoll's *12 Years* (2019), arguing that the former 'galvanises' whereas the latter 'expands'. I then look at other pieces that fall between these poles, arguing that the application

[12] Richard A. Lee, 'Protest Music as Alternative Media During the Vietnam War Era', in *War and the Media: Essays on News Reporting, Propaganda and Popular Culture*, ed Paul M. Haridakis, Barbara S. Hugenberg and, Stanley T. Wearden, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2009), pp. 24–40.

[13] Nadeem Karkabi, 'Staging Particular Difference: Politics of Space in the Palestinian Alternative Music Scene', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 6/3 (2013), pp. 308–28.

[14] Hettie Malcomson, 'Contesting Resistance, Protesting Violence: Women, War and Hip Hop in Mexico', *Music and Arts in Action*, 7/1 (2019), pp. 46–63.

[15] John Street, '"Fight the Power": The Politics of Music and the Music of Politics', *Government and Opposition*, 38/1 (2003), pp. 113–30.

[16] Avi Mugrahbi, Screening of *Between Fences* (2016) at Imbala – activist community centre, 20/03/2018.

[17] Denisoff's division of protest songs into magnetic and rhetorical is an interesting starting point. It is limited both in its specificity to songs, and in a loyalty to a Leninist approach that understands political community only in organisational and class-consciousness terms. Desinoff argues that songs from the so-called 'New Left' are 'reflective of individual rather than collective consciousness', ignoring collectiveness on the basis of political action, ideology, and most importantly race. This in turn misses the variety of ways art can strengthen and construct communities. Denisoff, 'Protest Movements: Class Consciousness and the Propaganda Song', *Sociology Quarterly*, 9/2 (1968), pp. 228–47.

[18] When discussing political songs that became anthems of Black political movements Shana L. Redmond highlights the 'call-and-response that lies at the heart of Black music'. See Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), p. 3.

of these concepts is nonetheless useful. Like many concert works of the past decade, all these pieces also have a strong visual and/or theatrical dimension.

Generation Kill takes its name from a 2004 bestseller non-fiction book by *Rolling Stone* journalist Evan Wright, who was an embedded reporter with the US army during the invasion of Iraq in the Second Gulf War.[19] Prins's piece features four musicians who play traditional instruments seated behind four semi-transparent screens and four musicians who play video-game controllers that trigger both sound and video projections on these screens. Two political devices deployed in the work have received particular attention in reviews. One is the allegorical set-up of the piece, which explores the idea of controlling a dehumanised body via technology. Echoing the piece's name, *Generation Kill*, this set-up problematises the novel ways in which killing takes place, particularly drone warfare, and connects it to a generation raised on video games.[20] The second is the piece's dramatic climax, where drone footage is projected on all screens in silence; this occurs two-thirds of the way into the piece, the typical moment for a climax in a musical work. The effectiveness of both these political devices has been praised by reviewers of the piece,[21] but I would argue that their effectiveness is reliant on the audience agreeing in advance with the points made by the use of these devices. If one is not already critical of the US invasion of Iraq and the use of drones, these political devices are not going to change your mind.

The first device criticises the dehumanising effect of technology in both drone warfare and video games. But the embedded use of technology in the piece is not in itself a criticism of this technology, especially given technology's centrality in new music.[22] The piece simulates and misplaces that which it criticises rather than spelling out a critical position:[23] If one is not already distressed by remote-controlled killing, one is unlikely to be impacted by remote-controlled video projections in a musical context.

The second device, presenting the drone moment in almost complete silence, can be read in two apparently contradictory ways: as a moral decision not to 'compose' such difficult materials, to avoid making entertainment of the horrific realities of people's lives or, on the contrary, as an intensely composed silence that functions as a heightening affect in a similar way to the use of silence in film.[24] In either case the silence's effectiveness is based on the belief that this footage speaks for itself. But with a different audience the footage might be

[19] Evan Wright, *Generation Kill* (New York: Putnam Adult, 2004).

[20] Tomasz Biernacki, 'Alien Bodies, Stefan Prins' Aesthetics of Music', *Dissonance*, 125 (2014), p. 38.

[21] For example, Alex Ross, 'Blunt Instruments', *New Yorker*, 12 November 2012, available at www.therestisnoise.com/2012/11/donaueschingen-review.html; Biernacki, 'Alien Bodies', pp. 38–9; Max Erwin, 'Stefan Prins – Stefan Prins: Augmented. Nadar Ensemble, Klangforum Wien, Yaron Deutsch, Stephane Ginsburgh. Kairos, 0015044 KAI'. *TEMPO*, 73, no. 290 (2019), pp. 81–3.

[22] Celeste Oram claims Prins's approach to technology in this piece is paradoxical: showing technological scepticism through pointing the critical gaze at technology (rather than those who use it), while simultaneously engaging positively with it as a composer and programmer. Celeste Oram, 'Darmstadt's New Wave Modernism', *TEMPO*, 69, no. 271 (2015), pp. 60–62.

[23] Martin Iddon examines the relation between critiquing and repeating politics in new conceptualism pieces. While his article focuses on Kreidler's *Fremdarbeit* and mentions *Generation Kill* only in passing, it still has relevance to this debate. Martin Iddon, 'Outsourcing Progress: On Conceptual Music', *TEMPO*, 70, no. 275 (2015), pp. 36–49.

[24] For silence as a compositional and dramatic device in film see Danijela Kulezic-Wilson,'The Music of Film Silence', *Music and the Moving Image*, 2/3 (2009), pp. 1–10.

received more neutrally, or even positively. This drone footage was, after all, shot and watched by US army personnel, many of whom probably saw it as morally justifiable. Similar footage has also been broadcast on television, not necessarily in a critical way. The piece assumes the audience's critical stance and only an audience that has the 'correct' political inclination will understand the piece's political intention. An audience member with a different political inclination may be affected by the piece, but there is nothing in the piece that will lead them to a critical position in regards to its subject matter.

Following Rousseau's logic, it seems unlikely that *Generation Kill* will change the mind of an audience member who is supportive of the US invasion of Iraq and the use of drone warfare. This does not mean the piece is politically valueless, but rather that it 'galvanises' instead of 'expanding' its audience. It does so by giving artistic shape to thoughts and concerns that are shared by its audience. It is difficult to assess the success of a piece in 'galvanising', but *Generation Kill*'s positive reviews can attest to its impact.

12 Years (2018), a solo piece by composer and performer Sarah Nicolls, is a prime example of a piece that wishes to 'extend the choir'. Taking its name from the 2018 IPCC Special Report that predicted that we only have a twelve-year window to change our environmental behaviour before the climate passes the point of no return,[25] *12 Years* consists of a prepared piano part, live speaking and recorded speech. It centres on a number of phone conversations between a fictional climate activist and her sister, debating their respective life choices. Recordings of climate scientists, activists and survivors of climate catastrophes are interspersed around these conversations. The conversations between the sisters do not construct a conventional sense of plot. Instead, the logic structuring the piece is that of conversion: the non-activist sister slowly changes her mind, accepting the legitimacy and urgency of her sister's activism, and reflecting on her own carbon footprint and political passivity. Presentations have featured a Q&A discussion with Nicolls and other climate activists or scientists.

Unlike *Generation Kill*, *12 Years* is unapologetically missionary. The piece is not aimed at changing the minds of climate change deniers. Rather, the non-activist sister is a personification of that large group of the audience who worry about climate change but are not fully committed to stopping it. The arguments and defences of the non-activist sister are the ones an audience member might make, the argumentation of the activist sister aimed at us, the audience.[26] The music, the fictional set-up, and the staging make the audience experience affective and emotional, but it is clear the work is a form of oratory designed to persuade. A feedback questionnaire circulated after the premiere shows that many found this effective:[27] none of the 22 audience members who replied reported that they were not aware of climate change before the concert, but 13 reported explicitly that the

[25] Valery Masson-Delmotte et al., 'IPCC, 2018: Summary for Policymakers', in: *Global Warming of 1.5 °C.*, p. 32. www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/spm/.

[26] 'My two main characters, sisters, could be informal, offhand and spiky and this combination gave me a good range for teasing out some of the stickier personal issues for people. Should you really be flying on that mini-break? As an audience member, listening to the one-sided conversations, you are not only filling in the gaps of what is not being said, you're also placing yourself on a spectrum and hopefully questioning, empathising with other viewpoints'. See Sarah Nicolls. '12 Years and a Piano' in *Dark Mountain*, April 2020. https://dark-mountain.net/12-years-and-a-piano/ (accessed 28 July 2020).

[27] Received in private communication, 15 July 2020.

piece helped them connect to the matter emotionally, persuaded them of the issues' urgency, or provoked them to think about their own actions. Only one person echoed Rousseau's argument that audiences go to the theatre to be entertained, not educated, writing 'Important issues – not sure if this experience best way to get action although raises feelings'. [sic] This questionnaire does not provide quantitative evidence for the effectiveness of *12 Years*, but it does provide qualitative reinforcements for a reading of the piece as an attempt at 'expanding the choir'.

These two works do politics in different ways. While *Generation Kill* has agreement between work and the audience at its heart, *12 Years* is centred around a disagreement that it wishes to resolve by creating movement in the audience's perspective. Whereas Nicolls identifies as an environmental activist and *12 Years* tries to inspire conversion to that cause, Prins labels *Generation Kill* a 'musical reflection'.[28] This difference should not be overstated: in both cases the pieces are directed at audiences that are at least somewhat politically close to their composers. Nonetheless, within this common framework the pieces represent contrasting strategies that go beyond the internal political devices within the works. Fittingly the works' relationships with their audience are echoed more broadly in their relationships with the new music scene, *Generation Kill* firmly situated within it, *12 Years* attempting to reach beyond it.

Prins's work is distinguished by its dense, fragmented, grindy and pitch-elusive soundscape and can be clearly situated within continental European new music, with Lachenmann and Glitch Art as obvious reference points.[29] The work has enjoyed a great deal of attention within the new music scene, but it is difficult to imagine it being accessible to wider audiences. In contrast, the diatonic, triadic and rhythmic nature of the music in *12 Years*, as well as its theatrical construct (conversations between sisters), gives Nicoll's work a potentially broader reach. Comparing the works' use of extended instrumental techniques is instructive: radically distorting 'natural' instrumental sound is central to *Generation Kill*, whereas extended techniques are used in *12 Years* to expand the palate of, rather than interfere with, the largely consonant piano part. The Glitch aesthetic is part of Prins's reflection on the politics of analogue–digital relations that are at the piece's heart; for Nicolls the musical aesthetic is a tool intended to inspire the audience to reflect emotionally on the political content of the piece, located in the spoken and recorded speech, as well as the Q&A sessions that follow it.[30]

Whereas *Generation Kill* involves eight musicians and a tech-heavy set-up, *12 Years* is a slim one-person project that can travel easily. *Generation Kill* has only been performed on new music stages, first at the Donaueschingen Musiktage with subsequent performances at venues such as the Darmstadt Summer Course and Gaudeamus Festival. It has been released on DVD by the exclusively new music label KAIROS. Its stature within the scene is also reflected in the many articles and reviews about it. *12 Years* was first presented within the London new music scene at City University and has gone on to be

[28] See Prins's website www.stefanprins.be/eng/composesChrono/comp_2012_03.html (accessed 28 July 2020) and Nicolls's podcast 'The Musical Activist' https://themusicalactivist.podbean.com/ (accessed 28 July 2020).

[29] Oram, 'Darmstadt's New Wave Modernism', p. 61.

[30] 'The audience's responses explained how they felt it useful and powerful to experience this narrative with the emotional exploration of music, rather than just the more intellectual reading the news by itself', Nicolls, '12 Years and a Piano'.

performed in diverse contexts such as Kings Place (London), Galway Jazz Festival, St George's (Bristol), the Phoenix (Exeter) and the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama.

'Galvanising' and 'expanding' the audience are not mutually exclusive. While the target of *12 Years* is to expand through conversion, it is also likely to galvanise audience members aligned with the activist sister.[31] Similarly *Generation Kill* galvanises a like-minded audience but the work certainly has the capacity to effect and influence audience members who have not given drone warfare much thought. Other pieces are more clearly situated between these poles. Pamela Z's *Carbon Song Cycle* (2014) is a multimedia piece for five musicians, including the composer, a visual artist and multiple projectors. The 50-minute work consists of 10 stylistically different movements, each loosely focused on one aspect of global warming. One of its main rhetorical tools is to blur the boundaries between 'reason' and 'passions', constantly shifting between scientific discourse and intimate emotional utterances, as well as between comprehensible speech and sound. By tying scientific knowledge about the climate to the intimate and universal act of breathing, the piece places itself between 'galvanising' and 'expanding'. In the third movement, for example, the sentence 'I am/was breathing' is repeated tirelessly until it finally fades into a long list of creatures who breathe, broadening the sympathy we felt towards the human voice to cats, dogs, fish and bacteria and so articulating the magnitude of the climate crisis.

The piece has similarities to the Prins and Nicolls works: it deploys spoken and pre-recorded texts to convey a message, as does *12 Years*, and, like *Generation Kill*, it uses fragmentation to defy any perceived didacticism. Its sound language is close to that of *12 Years*, with an emphasis on consonants and diatonic scales, but it also relies on manipulation and distortion of sound. Unlike *Generation Kill*, which allegorically simulates that which it critiques but does not attempt to convince the audience in its critical stance, *Carbon Song Cycle* makes a more explicit case for its positions with the use of text and juxtapositions. However, it does not go as far as *12 Years* in its 'expanding' attempts: the information it provides is fragmented, and only understandable by an audience that is at least somewhat aware of the issues at play. The piece also does not explicitly invite its audience to rethink their action or become activists. Although the piece's wide stylistic palette includes non-new-music genres such as punk, it is clearly written for a contemporary art audience, and is situated in an art-gallery scene.[32] *Carbon Song Cycle* functions between the two poles of 'expanding' and 'galvanising' the audience: it wishes to give those who are more or less concerned with the climate crisis some time to reflect about its importance and feel how it relates to them and their breathing bodies.

Soosan Lolavar's chamber opera *ID Please* (2017) is set in the security and passport control section of a terminal, where the relations between states and people, security and privacy, power and dignity are exposed. The characters portrayed by the three singers change between and sometimes within scenes. These shifts allow Lolavar to explore how power relations shift depending on the gender, race,

[31] This is reflected in the responses to the questionnaire, with one audience member writing: 'I'm currently putting together a workshop series based around the idea of climate change – so this performance resonated with all of the emotions I have'.

[32] Z. has worked both within and outside the new music scene. See George E. Lewis 'The Visual Discourses of Pamela Z', *Journal of Society for American Music*, 1/1 (2007), pp. 57–77.

class and personal history of the people being policed. The target of the work is not the security personnel, but the underpinning political structures. The piece does not advance a simple solution for how borders should be managed, nor does it explicitly suggest there should not be borders at all; rather, it makes that which is political in a given situation visible and audible.[33] It exposes how a seemingly banal security protocol creates hierarchies between people and how this results in terror and humiliation for some who go through it. Border control is not the sole issue at stake, rather it is a site that lays bare the ways in which states use questioning to enforce hierarchical power relations.

Lolavar's decision to highlight the seemingly sterile space of border control resonates with other contemporary pieces, especially by other non-white composers. In her discussion of *Airport Symphony* (2007) by Lawrence English and Chino Amobi's *Airport Music for Black Folk* (2016), Marie Thompson argues that the racialised experience of airports is mirrored in the differences between pieces about airports by white and Black composers.[34] While *Airport Symphony*, which English created with contributions from a number of other white composers, features an 'abstract and depersonalized soundscape' with plenty of ambience and almost no human voices, *Airport Music for Black Folk* starts off with the same ambience, but repeatedly subverts it with disorienting, violent, noise, robotic announcements, sirens and poetry. English refers to the airport as 'the best seat in the theatre'; Amobi's piece 'makes audible … the general, racialised, violence' of air travel.

This distinction helps illuminate *ID Please*'s relationship with its audience. Lolavar's work 'galvanises', giving voice to members of the audience who have experienced anxiety and humiliation under the cloak of national and international security. The work 'expands' through making such security practices visible, confronting those who pass easily through border controls with another reality. Finally, it invites all sections of the audience to reflect on the structures of power at play. As is true for most politically engaged pieces, *ID Please* exemplifies that 'expanding' and 'galvanising' is not a dichotomy. A 'choir' does not have clear boundaries; people are not either of a political position or against it; each person has their own specific history and will therefore relate differently to the content of a piece, in a relationship that is perhaps also changing.

'Activating'

The premise of the choir critique is that politically engaged art is a form of persuasion, trying to move people from one political point of view to another. A political artwork is then dismissed as useless if from the outset the audience shares the works' disposition. This is, however, too narrow a reading of politically engaged art. Art can subvert, distort, distract, elevate, mobilise, jam and crash; it can

[33] This resonates with Rancière's understanding of politics as 'a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience'. Politics is that which makes things visible, audible and so on. 'The Politics of Literature', in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010 [2004]), pp. 152.

[34] Marie Thompson, 'Whiteness and the Ontological Turn in Sound Studies', *Parallax*, 23/3 (2017), pp. 275–8.

speak and it can also act. In what follows I will discuss my own work in relation to the remaining response to the choir, 'activating'.

Discourse on artistic activism is much less developed than that of 'political art', although it has been receiving more theoretical attention in the last decade. Yates McKee's *Strike Art*,[35] for example, theorises art and artists' role in the Occupy Wall Street movement. Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, he writes of the 'Artist as Organizer', immersed in activist movements and using their skills for activist ends.[36] McKee argues that Occupy 'reinvented art as a force of radical imagination and direct action'.[37] While this is an overstatement of Occupy's importance, and the innovation of our time, activist art does seem to be on the rise.[38]

Strike Art focuses on visual art, but there are many examples of musical artistic activism. The early 2000s saw the formalisation of the international activist drumming network *Rhythms of Resistance* which now include dozens of bands, mostly in Europe,[39] as well as the revival of radical brass bands 'who continue a tradition of activist brass bands that dates back to the nineteenth century.[40] These groups, and others like them, play music at protests, picket lines, direct actions, flash mobs, etc. *Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping* perform 'spirituals' in chain retail stores to persuade shoppers to stop their shopping, and NGOs such as Greenpeace have for years been using music for some of their interventions.[41]

In February 2020, I participated in the *BP Must Fall* protest performance staged by *BP or not BP?* at the British Museum in London. *BP or not BP?* is a group of artists and activists who create artistic interventions to highlight and battle oil sponsorship, unfair labour and colonialism in culture institutes. The action was a three-day artistic occupation of the museum in response to the BP-sponsored 'Troy: Myth or Reality?', that began with the early morning sneaking of a three-metre-tall mock Trojan Horse full of people into the museum grounds. The next day saw a mass action of 1,500 participants who took part in creative workshops and talks led by artists and activists, many of whom were from frontline communities suffering both from climate change and colonialism. My role within the collective

[35] Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (London: Verso, 2017).

[36] McKee, *Strike Art*, p. 26.

[37] McKee, *Strike Art*, p. 237.

[38] While some artist activist groups started after the international political unrest of 2011, many others date back to the early 2000s and earlier. Reviewing McKee's book, Paloma Checa-Gismero writes that its 'risky account of Occupy Wall Street's centrality in enacting a change of paradigm in contemporary art practice is an enthusiastic and New York-centric attempt to expand the historical canon of Western avant-garde art from one of its centers'. Paloma Checa-Gismero, "Strike Art', *Filled: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism*, 4 (2016). http://field-journal.com/issue-4/review-yates-mckee-strike-art (accessed 31 July 2020).

[39] For the list of RoR bands see www.rhythms-of-resistance.org/about-us/bands/ (accessed 13 August 2020).

[40] See for example Rude Mechanical Orchestra, https://rudemechanicalorchestra.org/, Brass Liberation Orchestra http://brassliberation.org/ (accessed 7 August 2020) and the 'irresistible spectacle of creative movement and sonic self-expression directed at making the world a better place' of Honk! http://honkfest.org/about/ (accessed 7 August 2020); for the history of the Brass Band see Trevor Herbert, *The British Brass Band a Musical and Social History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 39.

[41] Carmen L. McClish, 'Activism Based in Embarrassment: The Anti-Consumption Spirituality of the Reverend Billy', *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 5, no. 2, (2009); Max Ritts, 'Environmentalists Abide: Listening to Whale Music – 1965–1985'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 35/6 (December 2017), pp. 1096–114; Damian Gayle, 'Greenpeace Performs Arctic Requiem in Effort to Touch Hearts Over Shell Drilling', *The Guardian*, 3 August 2015.

was to coordinate and participate in a musicians' group. This group co-composed the lyrics, music and choreography for three protest songs, which were then taught to small assemblies across the occupation. The event's musical part reached its climax when, on the second afternoon, one of the songs was sung in chorus by approximately 1,500 participants at the museum's Great Hall. Dozens of participants then stayed in the Great Hall for an unauthorised, overnight, body-casting session.

BP Must Fall is an extreme example of the first two attitudes to audience discussed earlier: it is a participatory performance that galvanises a convinced audience, the protesters, while at the same time reaching a very wide audience of people who could be convinced: the museum attendees, staff and trustees. These two audiences, the 'galvanised' and the 'expanded' were then extended by the interest the action drew from mainstream press, such as *The Guardian*, *The Evening Standard* and *ArtForum*, and a social media engagement that reached millions.[42]

One might ask if such actions can be understood as works of art.[43] Or one might more fruitfully ask what is gained from thinking of these actions as pieces of art. What is afforded to an activist action from the perspectives of the organisers, participants, public and media, if it is framed as art?[44] With *BP Must Fall*, as with many such pieces, I think the answer is creativity.[45] I believe every protest is creative (just as every artwork is political) and so every action could be meaningfully read by considering the part creativity plays in it. Framing an action in artistic terms centralises and instrumentalises this. The application of creative skills helps the action to achieve its goals through reimagining what an action looks and sounds like, creating memorable communicative images and moments, and engaging audiences through creative play and participation. Thinking of protest in artistic terms affords a kind of message building that is more symbolic, metaphorical, surprising and, at times, inspirational.

My final example takes a different approach to activist art and animates a different relationship with the choir critique. Over the last decade I have been involved in the struggle of the Sumarin family, a Palestinian family from the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Silwan. The family is fighting against the Jewish National Fund's (JNF) attempts to take over their home. These attempts, typical of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian Territories, started in the late

[42] Damien Gayle, 'Climate Activists Bring Trojan Horse to British Museum in BP Protest'. *The Guardian*, 7 February 2020; Aaron Walawalkar, 'Activists Try to Occupy British Museum in Protest Against BP Ties', *The Guardian*, 8 February 2020; Rebecca Speare-Cole, 'Climate activists leave British Museum after three-day protest over BP sponsorship', *The Evening Standard*, 9 February 2020; 'Climate Activists Stage British Museum Protest with Trojan Horse', *ArtForum*, 7 February 2020, www.artforum.com/news/protesting-bp-climate-activists-sneak-trojan-horse-at-british-museum-82127.

[43] McKee includes in his study anything that interacts with what he understands as the 'art system'. This then means for him that any action which includes artists can be considered as art. He argues for this approach by claiming that the merging of 'art' and 'non-art' is 'recurring and essential' in the history of modern art. McKee, *Strike Art*, pp. 26–7. While this approach is not without merit, it is also limited. The book analyses cardboard signs and gallery exhibitions with exactly the same tools. To me the objects of discussion can at times seem arbitrary, especially as my experience has taught me that non-artists can sometimes be much better at designing signs than professional artists.

[44] On the fruitfulness of using Affordance Theory to discuss the politics and aesthetics of art see Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 6–11.

[45] On the relations between art and creativity see Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso 2012), p. 16.

1980s when the JNF and Israeli settler groups convinced the State of Israel to take over this and other homes through a controversial interpretation of Israel's Absentee Property Law. Their aim was to pass the home on to the settler organisation that is actively trying to consolidate their hold on Palestinian East Jerusalem.[46] I wanted to create an oratorio to tell this unjust and twisted tale, but I knew that a piece about East Jerusalem, settler aggression and the JNF would only appeal to a small left-wing audience. I wanted to share what I was learning with this community to sharpen political understanding of the situation at hand, and deepen the emotional connection to the struggle, but my more ambitious goal was to do something that might directly advance the struggle and help the Sumarin family.

Custodian – an oratorio for a choir that acts (2018) combines the Israeli Absentee Property Law (1950), the biblical story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21), letters written by state officials and settler leaders, and protocols from court sessions and governmental inquiries relating to the case. Knowing that the audience was likely to be sympathetic to the cause from the start, I decided to mobilise this sympathy and we staged the work on the front steps of the JNF headquarters in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv without their approval (see Figure 1). The ensemble performing the piece consisted of musicians who were interested in using their art for the struggle: a conductor and six singers, some from a professional, others from an amateur background. Some were experienced activists, others not, and all were devoted to the cause. We then used the infrastructures of the activist group 'Free Jerusalem' and the culture hub 'Imbala' to spread the word about the performance in sympathetic circles. People from these groups also helped with technical aspects of the performance. Thus the performances were both artistic events and political protests. The very presence of the two hundred people who came to watch it was a protest.

The Sumarin struggle is not yet over; the family could still face eviction if it is lost. *Custodian* was one moment within a long-lasting campaign. From an activist point of view, the piece was successful in drawing a larger crowd and more media attention than any of the previous rallies.[47] The performances also widened participation: while some of the audience were from the Jerusalem anti-occupation activist scene, many were not. My sense is that many who attended had limited experience in political protest and especially civil disobedience. I attribute their decision to attend to both an interest in music and to a sense that being the audience of an oratorio performance was a safe way to form a defiant 'mass'. It could be argued that *Custodian*'s relationship to its audience is more conservative than that of *BP Must Fall*: they only sit 'passively' and watch. But following Claire Bishop's dismissal of the simple binary that an audience is either active or passive,[48] I suggest we consider the role that the audience is enacting rather than their actions. Not only are the audience members participating in civil disobedience by watching the piece in a place where they're not wanted, they actually play a crucial part in the piece's political and aesthetic operation.

[46] For more a more elaborate overview see Uri Agnon, 'How Settler Groups Could Use Anneation to Deepen Palestinian Disposition', *+972 Magazine*, 24 June 2020). www.972mag.com/settlers-annexation-jnf-elad-palestinians/ (accessed 2 August 2020).

[47] For instance an article in *Haaretz* newspaper, Nir Hasson, 'The Judge Said This Is Not The Theatre Nor The Circus, So What If She Said?' *Haaretz*, 28 October 2018. (Hebrew).

[48] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, p. 18.

Figure 1:
Uri Agnon, *Custodian – an oratorio for a choir that acts*, performed as direct action outside JNF headquarters, Jerusalem, October 2018. (Photo: Ella Israeli)

Custodian explicitly activates an 'artistic' context by presenting a staged work set within a historical music-theatre genre (the oratorio) for an audience. The oratorio form allowed me to explore the subject matter in ways that I hope strengthen understanding and feelings about the case; for example, by paralleling the biblical story of Naboth's vineyard with the plight of the Sumarins. Staging it in front of the JNF buildings had its drawbacks – the acoustics were far from ideal for one – but it allowed the work to directly engage with the struggle. Much was afforded by conducting this piece as both art and action. Our performance in front of the JNF headquarters was not shut down in the way that a conventional protest would likely have been. The audience performing as an audience legitimised the action as an artwork rather than a 'mere' subversion. Art functions in this piece not only through creativity but also with what Benjamin refers to as art's 'aura' and 'cultic value': the social values that are attributed to something because it is perceived as art.[49] While these values are not stable, in general art is considered as 'distinguished'; as speaking to 'essential' matters and having a unique relationship to 'truth'. Art is also thought of as something that should not be silenced. This 'aura' thus legitimised, reinforced and amplified our action, as well as protecting it from being closed down. It helped convey a message to a large crowd, to the press, to the JNF heads and staff on site, and to the court judge. This was made possible by the audience 'performing' the role of 'audience': by dressing as they want, sitting as they want, listening, laughing, judging, losing and

[49] I am referencing these terms as they appear in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. Miriam Hasen argues that Benjamin's usage of the 'aura' in 'The Work of Art' is narrower than elsewhere and that in this essay he sees the 'aura' as a 'fetishitic cult of beautiful semblance'. Walter Benjamin 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin Books, 2008 [1936]), p. 11. Miriam Bratu Hasen, 'Benjamin's Aura', *Critical Inquiry*, 34/2 (2008), p. 355.

finding interest, applauding and so on, they contextualise the action as art, with all that that implies. The audience's apparent 'passivity' here was a direct action.

This emphasis on the role of the audience does not mean that the musicians played a lesser part. Performing the piece in the JNF headquarters was only one of the choices that mattered. In *BP Must Fall*, the function of the music was to raise participants' spirits and bring the message to a wider audience; stylistic preferences and artistic ambitions were secondary to the goal of writing an accessible tune that could be taught and remembered by hundreds of people in a short period of time. In *Custodian*, artistic ambitions were central, if only for creating the work's aura. It involved negotiating aesthetic questions that relate to the piece's music, visuality and form that were all essential in shaping the messages, helping the audience to play their role (a laughing audience is different from a sleeping audience), and advancing the ties between the audience members, the artists and the cause at stake. The decisions to use only voices, to have the singers dressed as a Greek choir, to have the same performer portray different characters, the use and misuse of Jewish and Zionist rituals, contrasting them and blurring their boundaries, a modal but dissonant musical language, these were all decisions that shaped the piece, both as art and as action.

In considering the 'preaching to the choir' critique I have reflected on how artworks' relationship to their audiences' political disposition can be valuable, illuminating how artworks do politics. The terms I've put forward – 'expanding', 'galvanising' and 'activating' – are not intended as categories but as complementary capacities that can be deployed in diverse manners. As every artwork establishes its own, unique relation to its audience, the examples I have given are not templates but case studies that flesh out some of the tactics at play.

The success of political art is rarely quantifiable, and I am sure some sceptics will not be convinced by any of these responses. Others might worry that art is degraded or simplified by engaging with the political. Yet the interaction of artists and audiences has always had a political and moral dimension. Nevertheless it seems to me that not only is the desire for artistic activism on the rise but also that our vocabulary for such art is still very limited. There is much to be done in unpacking and rewriting new music's relationship to power structures through race, gender, class and geopolitics. This discussion should not be limited to the important questions of who participates and how in new music, but should also extend to understanding, perfecting and instrumentalising the tools we have within new music to fight for justice.