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HOLISTIC EXPERIENCE OF OPERA AND
THE *INTERNATIONAL OPERA THEATER* (IOT)

SUMMARY – This article is based on my experience during two performances of International Opera Theater’s 2013 production of the new opera *Camille Claudel*. I describe the experience in as much detail as necessary to convey its essence to the reader. I define the experience as spiritual, within a non-religious framework of spirituality. Subsequently I critically explore the experience in a range of relevant contexts of opera, theatre, performance and consciousness studies. My approach is part of the paradigm shift in consciousness studies from third person approaches to first person approaches, in so far as the experience I describe, and on which my argument is based, is at this point my own experience alone.

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on my experience during two performances of International Opera Theater’s 2013 production of the new opera *Camille Claudel*. I describe the experience in as much detail as necessary to convey its essence to the reader. I define the experience as spiritual: spirituality is to be understood for the purposes of this article in a non-religious context, with the implication that ‘spirituality culminates in the full development of mind’, and ‘any move in the direction of this fullness can be called spirituality’.¹ Subsequently I critically explore the experience in a range of relevant contexts of opera, theatre, performance and consciousness studies. My approach is part of the paradigm shift in consciousness studies from third person approaches to first person approaches, in so far as the experience I describe, and on which my argument is based, is at this point my own experience alone.

INTERNATIONAL OPERA THEATER (IOT)²

Since its formation in 2003, by Karen Saillant, IOT, based in Philadelphia, USA has presented one new work per year, commissioned by IOT and created in

¹ Peter Malekin & Ralph Yarrow, *Consciousness, literature and theatre: Theory and beyond*, London: St. Martin’s Press/New York: Macmillan, 1997, 90.

² <http://internationaloperatheater.org/iot/>

conjunction with it. Seven of the operas were based on or inspired by Shakespeare's plays (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* [two different operas], *The Tempest*, *A Winter's Tale*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Taming of the Shrew* and *Othello*). Other productions were based on the *Decameron* by Boccaccio, and *Buffalo Soldier*, based on the true story of the WWII segregated 92nd infantry division and the Italian Partisans who helped liberate Italy. The company also presented *Brundibar and the Children of Theresienstadt*, a production that tells the story of the children who gave 55 performances of the little opera *Brundibar* in the Theresienstadt concentration camp during WWII. In addition to the presentation of the short opera, *Brundibar and The Children of Theresienstadt* contains additional music that was performed in Theresienstadt; songs in German, French and Italian, by Ravel, Strauss, Dvorák and Mascagni. The piece uses spoken dialogue and is sung in four languages, English, French, German and Czech, Saillant wrote the libretto for this piece and compiled the music. In 2014, IOT presented *Azaio*, a combination of elements from Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* and Coleridge's poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. This opera featured a cast mainly of children, in addition to a bass-baritone for the mariner himself. The 2015 production was based on Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*. All productions were directed by Saillant.

CAMILLE CLAUDEL

The opera was composed by Gianmaria Griglio, with a libretto by Eleonora Gai and Griglio. It has two acts, Act One consists of a prologue and two scenes, Act Two consists of four scenes. The plot is framed by sculptor Camille Claudel (1864-1943) in old age (mezzo) remembering, in the prologue, her younger self (soprano) in a conversation with her brother, poet Paul Claudel (1868-1955) (tenor), before leaving for Paris, then being in Paris with Paul (Act One Scene One), and falling in love with sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) (baritone, Act One Scene Two). Act Two focuses on the nature of that relationship, the artistic and personal tensions brought about by their sharing of a studio, and Rodin's relationship with Rose Beuret (soprano). Scene One shows Rodin and Rose and Scene Two Rodin and young Camille. In Scene Three there is a fight between Rose and Camille, at the end of which Rodin takes a sheet off one of his sculptures to cover Rose, revealing to Camille that Rodin copied some of her own work into the creation of which she had poured all her life. Old Camille, who has been observing from a distance throughout, gets increasingly involved in the action in Scene Four, and in the end, Paul returns and old and young Camille merge into one. The stage presentation is directed in a non-realistic, symbolist manner, with a large amount of green gauze covering the stage and

used imaginatively by the performers throughout. The works of art are represented by a structure resembling the model of a crystal, and a live dancer.

THE EXPERIENCE

My experience of *Camille Claudel* was one of totality, where the libretto with its words and character, the music, the singing and the staging (concept, direction, acting, design) formed a genuinely holistic entity that went along with a mode of reception that involved more than the single focus of any one aspect or sense, or even of two aspects or senses, simultaneously. Single focus on just the score, or just the instrumentation, or just the singing, or just any isolated aspect of staging, or single focus on one of these after the other, even with the aim of thus arriving at a more complete picture, were quite well known to me from many years of attending opera performances. However, those insights were bound to remain fragmented, and such fragmentation in turn led to aspects of (intellectual) criticism that diminished or even disappeared in the holistic experience (which includes the intellect, but is not limited to it). For example, fragmented analysis of the voices revealed strained delivery, uneven intonation, and problems with the vibrato, in the case of one of the singers. In my holistic experience, those deficiencies do not disappear, but at the same time the holistic dimension meant that the full potential of every aspect of the opera resonated at every moment; thus, while aware of any shortcoming on an intellectual, analytic level, I was at the same time also experiencing the ideal potential of all aspects of the production and performance, because my experience was not limited to the intellect but addresses all levels of consciousness. Afterwards I was reminded of Mozart's description of the holistic nature of opera in Shaffer's *Amadeus*.

(...) That's why opera is important, Baron. Because it's realer than any play! A dramatic poet would have to put all those thoughts down one after another to represent this second of time. The composer can put them all down at once and still make us hear each one of them. Astonishing device: a vocal quartet! (*More and more excited*) ... I tell you I want to write a finale lasting half an hour! A quartet becoming a quintet becoming a sextet. On and on, wider and wider – all sounds multiplying and rising together – and the together making a sound entirely new! ... I bet you that's how God hears the world. Millions of sounds ascending at once and mixing in His ear to become an unending music, unimaginable to us. (To Salieri) That's our job! That's our job, we composers: combining the inner minds of him and him and him and her and her – the thoughts of chambermaids and Court Composers – and turn the audience into God.³

³ Peter Shaffer, *Amadeus*, London: Deutsch, 1980, 60.

In the case of *Camille Claudel*, my experience was new not only because of the nature of the music, the sound, as in this credo of Mozart. Rather, in addition to the music there were the integral aspects of the production. In the holistic experience, music, libretto, characters, light, costume, movement, aspects of the set, in particular for *Camille Claudel*, the dancer representing Camille's creative spirit, the large amount of green net fabric on the floor, and the sculpture (in Act One) and the parts of the sculpture (in Act II) created in the shape of a crystal lattice or DNA, resonated together. For me, this holistic, and in that sense spiritual experience (in a non-religious sense) went beyond the experience that operas by Wagner, for example, can enable: in them, an emphasis on the emotions clearly dominates all aspects of libretto and score, and productions either intensify this approach by focusing equally on the emotions, or they go against this emphasis and dilute it, most likely without being able to add other dimensions because the weight of the emphasis on the emotions in libretto and score is so overwhelming.

My experience of *Camille Claudel* was holistic, and because of this, any fragmented approach at making sense of that experience is doomed to failure. In the same vein, a description of the individual components must remain fragmented and non-holistic. My experience of *Camille Claudel* went beyond such fragments and allowed all components to take their effect together in unison, in a state of simultaneity. The question for me is: how did this holistic experience arise? There is likely to have been some level of openness within myself to allow this experience to manifest. Seeking to define that openness further is not part of this article. Here I want to explore whether it is possible to isolate causes in the production I saw that may have triggered, or contributed to the experience.

Roesner argues that predominantly, theories of and approaches to music theatre (which includes opera) 'investigate theatre as a synthetic vision, as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*⁴ or as a "musical multimedia"',⁵ but that 'these ideas still talk, for the most part, about performances with clearly distinguishable components and how to read them historically and analytically'.⁶ Those components are the 'libretto/book, lyrics, music/score, set and lighting design, musical and scenic direction, interpretation by the performers'⁷ which come into existence in this sequence and must be excavated, in the process of interpretation/analysis/critique, in reverse order. In contrast, Roesner proposes considering the components of music theatre not as 'additive but "fusional" phenomena'.⁸ Roesner finds the theoretical and

⁴ Guido Hiß, *Synthetische Visionen: Theater als Gesamtkunstwerk von 1800 bis 2000*, München: Epodium, 2005.

⁵ Nicholas Cook, *Analysing musical multimedia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

⁶ David Roesner, 'Dancing in the twilight: On the borders of music and the scenic', in: Dominic Symonds & Pamela Karantonis (Eds.), *The legacy of opera: Reading music theatre as experience and performance*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013, 165.

⁷ Roesner, 'Dancing in the twilight', 166.

⁸ Ibidem.

methodological underpinning of this approach in the context of intermediality. I also argue against an approach to understand my holistic experience at the centre of this article against the conventional context of seeking to explore the individual components; however, the theoretical and methodological context for my approach is not that of intermediality, but that of consciousness studies, in particular the concept of holistic experience. I define holistic experience as an experience that comprises all the conventional components, but goes beyond them to form an experience that is more than the sum of its parts, in which the parts may be found and recognised, but in which they are not isolated or solitary, and where even the analysis of the parts does not do justice to the role those parts play in the creation of the holistic experience – even further, an analysis of the parts in which a holistic experience may lead to the uncovering of problems with the parts that do no longer exist in the holistic experience. I propose that such a holistic experience is at the same time a new experience of the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

In the following sections of this article I therefore discuss the extent to which selected frameworks can help to explain the nature of this holistic experience. Those frameworks are selective (there may well be more that I do not cover in this article), and they come from a range of contexts – in an attempt to provide as broad as possible an exploration. The frameworks are other reported extraordinary experiences in opera performance, Csikzentmihalyi's concept of *flow*, Maslow's concept of *peak experiences*, Gabrielsson's concept of *strong experiences with music (SEM)*, Peter Brook's concept of *total theatre*, and the model of consciousness developed in Indian Vedanta philosophy.

CONCEPTUALISING AND CONTEXTUALISING THE EXPERIENCE

My holistic experience of *Camille Claudel* sits within the context of desirable extraordinary experiences encompassing all singers on stage at the time of the experience, and the audience as well. As I discussed elsewhere in more detail,⁹ Matheopoulos quotes from, and comments on an interview with Montserrat Caballé (b. 1933):

'I know this may sound strange to many people, an example of what I mean are those extra-special moments that occur from time to time in every artist's career, moments when you no longer feel you are on a stage making music but in a different dimension, inside, at one with music, and no longer aware of the act of singing or conscious of yourself or your body. The body is a concrete thing made up of physical matter. But when you are in this state of fusion with music, you

⁹ Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, *Theatre, opera and consciousness: History and current debates*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013, 143-159.

are totally unaware of it. You feel light, weightless, and afterwards (...) you feel so heavy again'. Sometimes during performances Caballé is aware of colleagues or conductors experiencing the same sensation 'this sort of trance when all of us feel we are not wholly here, and suddenly it's over in a flash, we look into each other's eyes and know we've just woken up and are no longer in another world but down here, on the stage, making theatre. I don't know why this happens, or how to explain it, but I know that it does and that audiences feel it, too. One of the worst things that can happen at such moments, when you are suspended in a dimension beyond, out of time and space, is applause'.¹⁰

Anna Tomova Sintov (b. 1941) emphasises the need for opera singers to remember, while they are on stage, that 'we are mere instruments in the realisation of a work and that our function is to merge with our colleagues until we are at one with them, the conductor, and through the latter's imagination with the composer'.¹¹ Sherrill Milnes (b. 1935) provides this report of the most extraordinary, spiritual, of performances he participated in (a performance of Verdi's *Otello* at the Vienna State Opera):

Right from the start we felt a sort of electricity in the air, the feeling that tonight the stars are in the right place – a Sternstunde as it's rightly called in German – and by the end of our Act II *Otello-Iago* duet the place exploded! It went berserk! At the end, we took our bows, the soli, the tutti, and half an hour of forty to fifty curtain calls after, we were still there. By then we were all getting tired of smiling, the way that you do at wedding receptions, and finally, an hour and a half and 101 curtain calls later, we got away!¹²

Barbara Bonney (b. 1956) describes the spiritual magic of a performance of *Der Rosenkavalier* by Richard Strauss during the Vienna State Opera's tour of Japan in 1994:

[I]t took off in such a magical way that we all felt that this is it. Now we can all be run over by a truck because we have described their exceptional, most desirable experiences on stage often in terms of religion and spirituality. Thus, mine is not an isolated experience. This evening we made this work come alive in the way we feel Strauss wanted. Nothing can ever be like this performance. Even the remaining performances of the run under the same near-ideal conditions were a disappointment after what we had experienced on that fourth evening.¹³

¹⁰ Helena Matheopoulos, *Diva: Great sopranos and mezzos discuss their art*, London: Gollancz, 1991, 61.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹² Helena Matheopoulos, *Placido Domingo: My operatic roles*, London: Little, Brown & Co., 2000, 178-179.

¹³ Helena Matheopoulos, *Diva: The new generation. The sopranos and mezzos of the decade discuss their roles*, London: Little Brown and Company, 1998, 7.

Thus, mine is not an isolated experience; while the artists quoted above, however, underline that such an experience does not happen often or repeatedly, mine occurred over two consecutive performances of the same production – not before nor since in other performances of different productions.

Conceptual frameworks for making sense of such spiritual experiences have been developed in a range of contexts. In Transpersonal Psychology, Abraham Maslow developed the concept of peak experiences, which represent rare and transforming moments in peoples' lives. The experience of unity (Caballé, Tomova Sintov, Milnes, Bonney) is one of those peak experiences. Csikzentmihalyi's concept of *flow* was added to the characteristics of peak experiences. It is a 'state of consciousness where people become totally immersed in an activity, and enjoy it immensely'.¹⁴ Bakker studied flow in the context of theories of emotional crossover or emotional contagion – how and why 'positive and negative emotions can crossover from one person to another'¹⁵ – and found that the peak experience of flow does indeed cross over from teachers to students. It is likely (a hypothesis, in empirical terms) that the occurrence of flow (or other peak experiences) in opera spectators crosses over to other spectators, and that similar crossovers take place among opera singers and between singers and spectators in both directions. Crossover can thus be related to the experience of unity as described by opera singers, as one possible way in which such unity can emerge.

Peak experiences in music, including opera, have been discussed very recently in terms of *strong experiences with music* (SEM). This research has been pioneered by Alf Gabrielsson of Uppsala University. Subjects were asked to describe 'the strongest, most intense experiences of music that you have ever had. Please describe your experiences and reactions in as much detail as possible'.¹⁶ Supplementary questions were whether this experience occurred only on the first time of listening to the music, or as well on subsequent occasions of listening; how the respondent felt 'before and after the experience', 'what the experience had meant in a long-term perspective',¹⁷ the cause of the experience, and whether such experiences were encountered in situations that had nothing to do with music. In total, 953 people participated in the project, 250 of those provided more than one report, so that the analysis is based on 1354 reports.¹⁸ The

¹⁴ Arnold B. Bakker, 'Flow among teachers and their students: The crossover of peak experiences', in: *Journal of Vocational Behaviour* 66 (2005), 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁶ Alf Gabrielsson, 'Strong experiences with music', in: Patrick N. Juslin & John A. Sloboda (Eds.), *Handbook of music and emotion: Theory, research, applications*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 551.

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 552.

analysis takes the shape of a descriptive system for SEM (SEM-DS), with seven basic categories, each with a different number of sub-categories. The basic categories are: general characteristics, physical reactions and behaviours, perception, cognition, feelings/emotion, existential and transcendental aspects and personal and social aspects. The experience of unity comes under the cognition category, within the sub-category 'changed experience of situation, body-mind, time-space, part-whole'.¹⁹

The unity of play, actors and spectators is at the centre of Peter Brook's concept of *total theatre*. In our problem ridden society, according to Brook, transcendence is difficult to achieve; however, he maintains that despite all movement, destruction, restlessness and fashion, there are 'pillars of affirmation', rare moments when during a theatre performance actors, play, and spectators merge collectively in a 'total experience, a total theatre'.²⁰ Brook further characterises such experiences: 'At these rare moments, the theatre of joy, of catharsis, of celebration, the theatre of exploration, the theatre of shared meaning, the living theatre are one'.²¹

In the context of consciousness studies, the holistic experience makes sense within the framework of the model of consciousness proposed by Indian *Vedanta* philosophy in terms of higher states of consciousness. At the centre of the *Vedanta* model of consciousness are distinct states of consciousness, each with its own range of experiential and physiological characteristics. Humans share the experience of three conventional states of consciousness, waking, dreaming and sleeping. Several layers make up the levels of experience characteristic of the waking state of consciousness. They can be imagined as six concentric circles around a core. The six levels are senses, desire, mind, intellect, ego, and feeling (together with emotions and intuition). The core is pure consciousness. Pure consciousness is a fourth state of consciousness, and serves as the basis for the six expressed levels of consciousness characteristic of the waking state of consciousness. Pure consciousness is also at the basis of the states of sleep and dream. It can be experienced either on its own, or together with waking, dream or sleep. Experienced on its own, it is a state of consciousness that is devoid of any contents otherwise associated with the senses, desire, mind, intellect, ego, or intuition, feeling or emotion. A person experiencing pure consciousness on its own is not aware of anything other than consciousness itself. The experience of pure consciousness together with waking or dreaming or sleep is characteristic of higher states of consciousness as defined in the *Vedanta* model of consciousness. In the highest of these, unity consciousness, the field of pure consciousness is directly perceived as located at every point in creation; the experiencer experiences himself and his

¹⁹ Ibid., 557.

²⁰ Peter Brook, *The empty space*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, 151.

²¹ Ibidem.

entire environment in terms of his own nature, which he experiences to be pure consciousness.²² As the frequency of the experience of higher states of consciousness increases, so does the clarity of the experience, and its depth. To a person initially unfamiliar with experiences of higher states of consciousness, they will come across as unique. Initially, at least, they are short-lived (as reported by the opera singers quoted above). The experience of unity is typical of higher states of consciousness within the *Vedanta* model, as the highest level of experience is characterised by the very unity of the experiencer with everything and everyone in the world.²³

TRIGGERS OF THE HOLISTIC EXPERIENCE

Now that I have described the holistic experience and contextualised it in a range of relevant explanatory frameworks (reported extraordinary experiences in opera performance, Csikzentmihalyi's concept of *flow*, Maslow's concept of *peak experiences*, Gabriellson's concept of *strong experiences with music* (SEM), Peter Brook's concept of *total theatre*, and the model of consciousness developed in Indian Vedanta philosophy), it is possible to discuss the characteristics of the production that may have contributed to this experience. I identify them in the key characteristics of the work of IOT to date, and the role in that work of the founding artistic director, Karen Saillant, and the current music director, Gianmaria Griglio.

The Lyrical Style

For the scores for all of IOT's new operas, Saillant aimed for an Italian lyrical style, and the librettos were written and performed in Italian. These are the first two dimensions in which to search for potential components of the trigger of the holistic experience at the centre of this article. Although not a composer herself, a long career as a classically trained opera singer has given Saillant the ability to develop an ideal for the kind of music she would like to have for IOT's operas – an ideal that the composers working with her on IOT's productions have been achieving to different degrees, perhaps depending on the degree to which they subscribe to the position that quality works in the Italian lyrical style can no longer be achieved, following the pinnacle of the style in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century works of Italian greats Verdi and Puccini. The Italian lyrical style Saillant has in mind should come across to the listener as sounding

²² for further details, see Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, *Theatre and consciousness: Explanatory scope and future potential*, Bristol: Intellect, 2005, 24-29.

²³ Ibidem.

lyrical and melodious in the same way that Verdi or Puccini's music sounds, but should also retain a certain relevance for today's audiences and avoid direct imitation of its nineteenth-century precursors.

Defining the Italian lyrical style as such is a complex matter. Writing about Puccini's late style, Andrew Davis, following the work of Leonard B. Meyer,²⁴ defines distinct levels of musical style: style can be construed on the level of a single work, such as 'the style of *Turandot*'; a group of works, such as 'Puccini's mature style'; a single composer, such as 'Puccini's style'; a group of composers, such as 'the style of the *giovane scuola italiana*' (i.e., the 'young Italian school' of the late nineteenth century); a genre, such as 'the style of nineteenth-century Italian opera'; or a historical era, such as 'the late Romantic style'.²⁵ At any of the various levels, style can be defined further with reference to specific features of the melody and texture (in which melody is central at all times and, furthermore, in which the melody manifests a delicate balance between stepwise motion versus motion by leap), orchestration (often an emphasis on strings, especially to double the vocal melodies), harmony (a predominantly consonant harmonic language in which dissonance is present but tightly controlled), voice leading (an emphasis on smooth voice leading and on certain anti-historical features, such as the suppression of functional dominant harmonies), and rhythm and meter (including, most distinctively perhaps, the use of a written-out *rubato* that lends the music an improvised quality). Davis explores in detail these constitutive components of what he calls Puccini's Romantic style, as well as deviations from that style that mark his last four operas, *Il tabarro*, *Suor Angelica*, *Gianni Schicchi*, and *Turandot*. Within the contexts and definitions developed by Davis, it will be possible for musicologists to discuss and pinpoint the precise characteristics of the *Italian lyrical style* that Saillant aspires to for IOT's operas, specifically within the scores of the ten new operas premiered by IOT so far.

Italian librettos

The second characteristic of IOT's work, and that of *Camille Claudel* in particular, which can have contributed to triggering my holistic experience at the centre of this article, is that the scores of IOT's productions are in Italian. According to Griglio, Italy and Italian classical music and lyrical opera have had considerable influence on the history of classical music and lyrical opera beyond Italy: for example, Vivaldi's non-operatic work was much admired by J.S. Bach. Griglio points out that Wagner completed *Parsifal* in Palermo and worked on

²⁴ Leonard B. Meyer, *Style and music: Theory, history, ideology*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989.

²⁵ Andrew Davis, *Il Trittico, Turandot, and Puccini's late style*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010, 8-9.

Tristan und Isolde while in Venice, implying a possible influence of the environment on the composition.²⁶ Paolo Valenti (in conversation with Saillant²⁷), considers further that not only is Italian the language of the first operas ever written (in Florence at the turn of the seventeenth century), but the Italian culture is synthetic; dominated by foreign cultures throughout history, it has been able to absorb into its culture the finest aspects of its foreign dominators. In Venice we see Jerusalem. In Sicily we see Arabia, in Turin, France, in Naples, Spain and so on. In its ability to adapt, it has synthesized, opened and accepted the finest parts of other cultures. Italy has given us what many consider to be the most significant collection of diverse art on our planet.

The nature of the Italian language itself also may be one of the triggers for the holistic experience of this work; that is, the language itself has been seen historically as enabling or, indeed, as demanding a particular musical style. It would take further linguistic study to substantiate Valenti's idea of the Italian language as holistic in the sense that that country's architecture or culture might be considered holistic, but with regard specifically to libretto and music. Griglio, who also co-wrote the libretto for *Camille Claudel*, has commented in more detail on this point:

On the subject of music and text, I can say that, at least for myself, the music mostly comes out of the text: I see the Italian language as generally curving, where English for instance has more angles. Therefore, generally speaking, an Italian text demands a rounder type of music, but at the same time the music follows almost automatically by reflecting the text. Specifically, it has to do of course with the abundance of vowels present in the Italian language, where not a single word ends with a consonant (unless it was borrowed from another language) and the vast majority of words have less than three consonants in a row (but even then, like in the word 'applaudire', the three consonants are followed by a diphthong, the vowels making up for the use of the consonants and softening them). I think of it as modelled on the hills of Tuscany, with a natural flow that is not interrupted by rough angles. The music follows the same pattern, so, even in situations where you'd expect it to be more angular (like in a scene of rage), it's still soft around the edges.²⁸

The anecdotal evidence for the impact of the Italian language on the spectator is substantiated by research into the relationship between language and consciousness, Travis et al. have pointed out that in human languages, the relation between

²⁶ Gianmaria Griglio, Interview by author (e-mail, July 14, 2013).

²⁷ Karen Saillant referred to this conversation in an interview by the author (Skype, February 12, 2013).

²⁸ Ibidem.

sound and meaning is not inherent in the sound itself.²⁹ Even if the listeners do not understand the words uttered, they still perceive them, and the perceived sounds are bound to have some impact on them, depending on the language. Travis et al. were able to demonstrate that reading aloud a text written in Sanskrit even without knowing the meaning of the words read produces effects otherwise associated with meditation, such as reduced skin conductance and enhanced EEG alpha power and increased EEG coherence.³⁰ It should, therefore, be possible to develop studies specifically to establish the extent to which the Italian language has an impact on consciousness, especially the emotions, possibly comparing opera libretti with everyday texts, such as newspaper articles, and comparing Italian with other languages.

Commedia Dell'Arte

A further influence on the Italian direction of IOT's work is Saillant's long exposure to and interest in *Commedia Dell'Arte*.

Commedia characters live their lives totally in the present, not thinking about the future or living in the past. They are also aware to live their lives on the stage and this is why there is no 4th wall. For this reason, there is a constant communication between them and the audience. For this reason, they are never alone. They are not necessarily talking to the audience, but there are many forms of communication, for example emotional communication between the character and the audience. In comedy, you know that you are communicating well when you receive laughter. There is also the communication of the internal thoughts. Nothing in *commedia* is psychological. Everything is out, exposed. You are essential, naked in front of the audience. You allow them to see everything, even those parts that are imperfect. You use that as a way to stimulate laughter and at the same time heal the audience, letting them know that if you can expose all of your flaws (and you can laugh about them) that they can do this too and feel better about themselves. It is a spiritual and at the same time a physical exchange that exists between stage and audience. You are healing them and yourself and the same time.³¹

Cannot a new production of an existing opera be new and separate from the interpretation of others? Only in the rarest of cases, because many directors, conductors, musicians, singers and others involved in such a 'new' production will by nature of their profession have experience with that existing opera, and spectators are highly likely to be influenced in some ways, even if unconsciously, with regard to an existing opera, in the form of expectations, for example. Sail-

²⁹ F.T. Travis et al., 'Physiological patterns during practice of Transcendental Meditation Technique compared with patterns while reading Sanskrit and a modern language', in: *International Journal of Neuroscience* 109 (2001), 72.

³⁰ Travis et al., 'Physiological patterns'.

³¹ Saillant, Interview by author (Skype, February 12, 2013).

lant is adamant that the opera produced by IOT should be new, in order for the properties to be original and drawn from the imagination of the individuals creating the work, rather than being culled from interpretations of others who have performed the work in the past.

The Intense Rehearsal Process

For IOT's productions, the production team comes together for a month in the summer of each year in Città della Pieve, Italy, for rehearsals. Those rehearsals serve as the framework for the exploration of intuitive communication modalities at the centre of Saillant's work. Saillant believes that IOT's singers need to self-organise themselves with the support of the directors so that they can bring their individual histories to the realisation and elevate the spirituality of the experience. Rather than informing the singers of the blocking in advance, Saillant allows blocking to develop organically while the singers are in movement. In the example below, Saillant elaborates on the opening scene of *Camilla Claudel*:

For example, *Camille Claudel* opens with the character of Old Camille sitting on the chair and two singers are underneath her cape, so that was a direction, that is how we began the opera. Then I said you are going to open your cape first to one, then to the other. I didn't say on measure 37 you are going to open your right arm, on measure 45 you are going to open your left. I just said you are going to open your arm and discover Camille Claudel in your past which this cape is representing and then her spirit of creativity even fills you more in your imagination as you are delving into your past. Then the music is explaining it too.³²

The vocal work is part of this process – further analysis of Saillant's specific approaches in that respect follow in the next section. IOT seeks to create experiences that foster self-discovery and acceptance, which Saillant believes are at the heart of empathy and therefore meaning-filled intercultural communication. Opera is the complete integration of all of the arts and is therefore IOT's main medium. A main objective of IOT is to bring artists of diverse backgrounds together to create pieces that break through boundaries of communication. In working with those intercultural communities in her productions, rather than having an idea in her mind and then make it happen, Saillant would rather not have an idea in her mind and leave everything as possibilities in working with the people who come to do the project, taking what they bring and allowing it to percolate into some kind of unexpected creation.

To the production process in Città della Pieve, Saillant brings her underlying understanding of her work as a woman. In principle, Saillant identifies her work as a battle with the masculine side: the feminine side has tended to come across as overly emotional, and this has made it very difficult even for herself as a director

³² Ibidem.

in what she perceives as a man's world of opera directing. She argues that as a culture we are very visual, we do not know how to listen, to each other, and to hear. This phenomenon has been explored in depth by Berendt.³³ Therefore, Saillant maintains, what the singer presents visually has an impression on the brain, with different areas of the brain responsible for processing sound and sight. For Saillant, related to this is the issue of singers trying to be entertainers, because the audiences are more easily able to identify them and relate to them. In comparison, real artistry is much subtler, lighter, and more delicate and nuanced.

Men are women and women are men, we all have both aspects within us. Thus women are not that different from men, especially from men that have a well-developed feminine side. The feminine side is very important in terms of creativity, but you need the masculine side to make it happen. The art form of dance has been dominated by women, but in the world of opera women have not had that level of opportunity. As an older woman I have particular problems that a younger woman might not have. Younger singers project their feelings towards their mother or grandmother on to me, and may have problems accepting my authority as a director, especially when I ask them to work in a way they have never worked in before.³⁴

Saillant also brings a clear understanding to the rehearsal process of how information flows in conventional and unconventional ways between and among the members of the production team. Biophotons, Saillant feels, are the essence that is transmitted by an artist – especially when the artist has a feeling of well-being. This feeling, however, has been mostly eliminated by the way artists are ‘taught’ in our society and the way art is made. IOT’s mission is to change this. Biophotons, argues geobiologist Hans Binder, are referred to as ‘quanta of light’ in new physics and alternative medicine, or as ‘ultra-weak emission of photons of biological origin’.³⁵ Leading researcher into the biophoton phenomenon, Fritz-Albert Popp uses biophotons in processes to establish the quality of food, or to analyse tumour tissue.³⁶ Binder considers the ‘light in our cells, people’s atmosphere, the spark of light in us, the core of our life-light, divine light in the cell of life, or the spark of life once sent out as the soul’ as synonymous with biophotons.³⁷ Saillant comments: ‘There is an Italian word for this: scintilla- the meaning of this word during the Renaissance was “the light inside an individual which can never be extinguished”’.³⁸

³³ Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *Nada Brahma: Music and the landscape of consciousness*, Rochester: Destiny, 1987.

³⁴ Saillant, Interview (2013).

³⁵ Hans Binder, Personal communication with author (Email, 10 November 2012)

³⁶ Fritz Albert Popp, *Biophotonen – Neue Horizonte in der Medizin: Von den Grundlagen zur Biophotonik*, Stuttgart: Haug, 2006.

³⁷ Binder, Personal communication (2012).

³⁸ Saillant, Interview (2013).

Design

In terms of design, for the last nine productions, Saillant has worked with cloth or net on stage. It started out as an exercise in rehearsals, when Saillant covered singers with chiffon fabric while they were lying on the floor doing exercises. Then she used net fabric in her productions, very small initially, but increasing in size, up to 80 yards in 2012.

I just kept adding. Even with a small amount it was an unwilling collaborator because you can't predict it. It was so interesting between the acts to see the singers dealing with the fabric. I had a lot of fabric on the floor which makes it dangerous and they have to pay attention to the fabric so in intermission they would come out and make a little pathway across the stage. Everybody is barefoot and I believe the fabric grounds everyone, it is under their feet so they have to be aware of it. Even the way you walk is different so there is a tension in the present moment. Even when people are auditioning I ask people to take their shoes off. I think it is impossible for people to be connected to their full vulnerability or potential with their shoes on.³⁹

She used the net fabric in rehearsal to help the singers stop thinking so much and to force them to be in the moment, because the net is very unpredictable and it also has a certain sculptural quality. In auditions it was very interesting when she put the net into somebody's hands, saying: 'Oh, this will interest you'. She can see immediately by the way they manipulate the net whether they understand metaphor. What happens when she gives them the fabric is usually one of two things: either the singer starts using the fabric in a literal way, such as rolling it up, or folding it into equal bits, or measuring it, straightening it, doing something with it that makes sense. Or the singer uses the fabric in a metaphorical way, using it and continuing imaginative, creative movement with the fabric throughout their audition piece. The colour is different every year, reflecting the opera's essence in a spiritual sense: in 2012, for example, it was peach. On underwater images of the Caribbean Saillant saw a fish that was extremely beautiful, the red lionfish, which had a particular colour of peach that she selected for the production. The beauty of the colour was in contrast to the villainous nature of the fish being villainous, but in line with the colour representing the major theme of the production, oppression. Usually, Saillant arrives at the colour choices for her productions intuitively, adding rationalisations later in some cases, but not all.

³⁹ Ibidem.

Voice Work

In addition to the specific nature of the music and the libretto for IOT's operas, and the dimension of the production, with its components of directorial concept and design, Saillant places considerable emphasis on working with the singers to liberate the full potential of their voices. Here, Saillant can go back to her own training and professional practice as a singer. According to Saillant, many actors and opera singers are trained in an academic environment that supports a lot of thinking. From her experience of having worked with many opera singers over the years as colleagues during her own career as a singer, and within IOT in her role as director, many singers are not able to be present while they are performing. They are thinking about the technique they have been taught to follow. For example, Saillant noticed that singers think about their uvula or their tongue, or are excessive in opening their mouths, which leads to often visible tension on the jaws, and staring of the eyes. For Saillant, singing with fixated, wide open eyes, and wide open mouth, is therefore a mistake. It is not necessary. Many photographs suggest that this has become a false impression that people have, because they do not understand how pronunciation occurs and what consonants we use our jaws for – there are only five and otherwise the jaws should be completely free. Especially in large opera houses, many singers engage in great tensions in their bodies and their faces. Saillant explains the cause of the problem with the wide open mouth with reference to physiology: the optic nerve is closely related to the phrenic nerve, which monitors the blood gases and controls the respiratory system, especially relating to the diaphragm. An example may help to illustrate this specific aspect further: in summer 2012 Saillant was working with a soprano who was making that mistake, and she was able to convince her that it is not necessary. The singer was shocked at the freedom she had when she was not dislocating her jaw by over-opening her mouth.

There is much harshness in the delivery of singing, singers are often forcing their sound into their environment rather than allowing it to arrive. Saillant observed that many singers do not hear the first few notes they sing, and are thus worried that their voices will not come out. That is one of the reasons they force sound out and try to hold on to it. Many changes and transformations through the *Luminous Voice* workshops (in Rome, November 2012) happened without Saillant having to point explicitly to the problems. For example, one tenor hardly ever had his left heel on the ground for his first audition. Saillant did not mention this to him directly, but the topics of being grounded, of being in character, breathing exercises, and exercises locating and subsequently working on areas of the body that were tense, were part of the workshop. At the final audition his foot was firmly on the ground. This approach ensures the singer

never gets obsessed with what they perceive to be their own problems, although all issues are being addressed.

Another problem Saillant has observed in working with singers has to do with tension in the shoulders, as seen in elevated shoulders. There should only be one finger space between the edge of the bottom of the ribs and the top of the pelvis. Jutting the jaw forward is also problematic. The jaw goes back into the hinge in the skull and so when it is jutted forward it is actually dislocated and creates tension. The jaw should only be used for five consonants then all of the rest, so it is important that the jaw is free and relaxed. Fixated eyes are problematic because they indicate some kind of tension that occurs in the optic nerve that is then experienced in the phrenic nerve which is the nerve that controls the diaphragm. So there is a holding of the breath. Listening to a very brief excerpt of soprano Dara Hobbs as Isolde from *Liebestod*,⁴⁰ Saillant comments that Hobbs has a lovely voice, but she is not yet at the point where she has achieved the ability to be fully in the moment in the sense that she still thinks the words as she is singing them. Saillant explains that the way the voice works is that the phrase appears in the unconscious mind and then is sung, without thinking. However, some singers are thinking, and it affects their breathing: they hold their breaths, even if only a little. The reason for this, Saillant found, is probably that most singers do not know the text on its own. They know it as related to the music, but not separate from it. In order for the respiratory system to know how much breath to take for a phrase, there is a change for every vowel pitch and intensity in terms of the minute muscular changes that occur in the system and in the larynx, in every part of the vocal mechanism. Her work with singers led Saillant to conclude that if the singer does not know without a doubt, totally unconsciously, the complete text of what it is they are saying, they will hold their breath at some point or another. Holding the breath is the number one cause of a lot of problems such as emphysema, asthma, and vocal problems. Singers' bodies thus need to know what it is they are going to sing.

When the singer makes such mistakes, Saillant argues, it prevents the audience from experiencing a transcendent presentation. In contrast, Saillant has observed that when a singer is balanced, and in harmony, especially with his/her breath, with the way that the breath is flowing over the vocal folds, and the spontaneous reflexive synergy of breath, then the sounds are very natural and beautiful.

Overcoming Shortcomings

Finally, the holistic experience of *Camille Claudel* occurred despite the perception of undeniable shortcomings. In this context, writing about Hans Werner

⁴⁰ on <http://www.tristan-und-isolde-minden.de/sites.php?action=501>

Henze's *We Come to the River*, with a libretto by dramatist Edward Bond, Robert Hatten argues that a number of issues with the composition 'undermine the dramatic effectiveness of the music in the opera as a whole',⁴¹ but concedes that apart from moments when the opera 'degenerates (...) into a mere echo of life's multiplicities', the opera can overcome those flaws and can 'generate irony, and even sustain a dialectic among ideologies'.⁴²

Spirituality of Karen Saillant's Life

For all humans, their individual paths in terms of spiritual development, include the necessity to make decisions, major or minor, at many junctions and crossroads. There were at least two major crossroads for Karen Saillant. She had many aspirations for her life when she left her foster family at the age of eighteen, with whom she had been living ever since shortly after her birth. The director of Children's Aid told her that because of her childhood in foster care, and despite a full scholarship to Indiana University, she would not be able to survive in this world. This was a decisive moment in her life, and against the odds of the system she decided at that point: 'You have to keep going and you must not let anything stop you, and then you can succeed'.⁴³

Her brother, also in foster care, but with many families over the years, not with one as in Karen's case, was initially considered as retarded by the authorities, who hoped he would turn out suitable for a career as a farm hand. He, too, broke through this net of expectations, and ultimately graduated with a PhD in chemistry, was vice president with Ford Motors and developed into a major player in the field of sustainability. The second crossroads came with events that began on 8 February 1999. Her husband stopped a man from attacking her in front of their house in Philadelphia. He managed to hold the man down until the police arrived, but collapsed with a massive heart attack while resting on the neighbour's steps. In a Facebook status update sixteen years later, Saillant wrote:

The rescue squad arrived & they resuscitated Bernie. It took 27 minutes. They saw that Bernie was young & they hadn't wanted to give up. Bernard came back from college & eventually left school to help Christian & me care for Bernie. One time Bernard physically carried his dad in his arms into the emergency room when Bernie spiked a high fever & had to be rushed back to the hospital. We exercised Bernie & danced with him in bed. I sang to him & bought a small piano to fit in the space next to his bed so I could play for him. We read him

⁴¹ Robert Hatten, 'Pluralism of theatrical genre and musical style in Henze's *We Come to the River*', in: *Perspectives of New Music* 28 (1990) no.2, 297.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 308.

⁴³ Karen Saillant, Interview for *Turning Points for Children* (2015), Philadelphia. Accessible at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guZRWiYX_wU

stories & Christian played & replayed his favorite Honeymooner episodes over & over. We did everything we could to give him a beautiful experience. My cousin Mike & his wife Barb & their children came with picnic dinners (even the silverware & tablecloth). We spread it out across his hospital bed, always including him in conversation. Healers & acupuncturists & chiropractor friends came to try to revive him. Strangers called saying they had heard about Bernie & wanted to come by to help, so we opened our doors to them. I strapped Bernie into his wheel chair & took him all over center city. One day it was to The PA. House of Representatives home care hearing as an advocate for in home health care. We all cried. I took him in his wheelchair on walks to The Reading Terminal & even to concerts at The Academy of Music. Christian & Bernard & I took him to see Toy Story 2. Bernie loved nothing more than to laugh & we believed that if anything would wake him up, it would be laughter. We danced & loved & exercised & carried him & sang to him & shared our lives for that year & a half. But Bernie never woke up. He died on June 15, 2000, with his sons & myself by his side.⁴⁴

It was shortly after his death that Saillant felt the absolute need to create the work she has been involved in ever since.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have described an experience I had in relation to two performances of a production of *Camille Claudel* by the *International Opera Theater*. I explored that experience in a range of explanatory contexts, and discussed potential factors characteristic of IOT's work that, on their own or together, can contribute to the creation of the holistic experience. I conclude with the conviction that empirical research can establish the frequency of experiences of unity (such as mine, serving as the basis for this article, or the ones referred to from Caballé, Tomova Sintov, Milnes, and Bonney, among others) across wider cohorts of opera singers and spectators, for example by using questionnaires. Empirical research can also explore in more depth the validity and strength of the explanatory contexts I introduced in this section, with regard to peak experiences, flow, SEM, Brook's concept of total theatre and the Vedanta model of consciousness. Finally, empirical research can establish the validity and importance of each of the special features of IOT productions on their own and together, both for the past productions and for forthcoming ones: the music in a holistic Italian lyrical style, the libretto in Italian, and the approaches to production, design and singing.

⁴⁴ Facebook statement, 8 February 2015.

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