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Audience Perception in Experiential Embodied Music Theatre: A Practice-based Case Study

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Abstract

A common feature of contemporary music theatre is that it is situated across various disciplinary boundaries, often leading to a complex layering of music with other artistic forms, such as theatre, text, film, and movement (Bonshek 2006; Rebstock & Roesner 2013; Lehmann 2006). In some cases, such interdisciplinarity has led creators to explore spaces beyond traditional theatrical settings, such that performance location becomes an important and intrinsic feature of a work's multimodal fabric. A recent example of such work—*I Only Know I Am* (2019), composed by the authors—provides a case study here in which ideas of experientialism are explored with reference to a variety of extant approaches to theatre and music theatre. The authors propose understanding this work as 'experiential embodied music theatre', synthesising aspects of a variety of theatrical modes.

First, we consider the work's use of space, place and history in the context of environmental and site-specific theatre in order to understand the means by which it attempts to engage the audience. Taking this idea further, we consider the sonic place that is generated through the architecture of the work's form, supported by the narrative structure and ideas of silencing and stasis. From here, we consider the genre of immersive theatre, and draw a connection between this theatre practice, embodiment in music theatre, and embodied music cognition, so that we can understand the ways in which audience members may embody the music whilst maintaining a traditional audience-performer relationship. This journey from compositional conception, to context and examples, and through to audience perception outlines a reading of this work as experiential embodied music theatre from a variety of perspectives.

Zusammenfassung

Ein verbreitetes Merkmal des zeitgenössischen Musiktheaters ist, dass es sich über verschiedene disziplinäre Grenzen hinweg bewegt, was oft zu einer komplexen Überlagerung von Musik mit anderen künstlerischen Formen wie Theater, Text, Film und Bewegung führt (Bonshek 2006; Rebstock & Roesner 2013; Lehmann 2006). In einigen Fällen hat diese Interdisziplinarität die Schöpfer*innen dazu veranlasst, Räume jenseits der traditionellen Bühnen zu erkunden, sodass der Aufführungsort zu einem wichtigen und wesentlichen Merkmal der multimodalen Struktur eines Werks wird. Ein aktuelles Beispiel für ein solches Werk – *I Only Know I Am* (2019), das von den Autor*innen komponiert wurde – liefert hier eine Fallstudie, in der Ideen des Experientialismus mit Bezug auf eine Vielzahl bestehender Ansätze für Theater und Musiktheater untersucht werden. Die Autoren schlagen vor, dieses Werk als „erfahrungsorientiertes, verkörpertes Musiktheater" zu verstehen, das Aspekte verschiedener Modi des Theaters zusammenfasst.

Zunächst betrachten wir den Umgang des Werks mit Raum, Ort und Geschichte im Kontext von umwelt- und ortsspezifischem Theater, um zu verstehen, mit welchen Mitteln es versucht, das Publikum einzubeziehen. Weiterführend betrachten wir den klanglichen Ort, der durch die Architektur der Form des Werks erzeugt wird, unterstützt durch die narrative Struktur und Ideen des Schweigens und der Stasis. Von hier aus ausgehend betrachten wir das Genre des immersiven Theaters und stellen eine Verbindung zwischen dieser Theaterpraxis, der Verkörperung im Musiktheater und der embodied music cognition her, so dass wir verstehen können, auf welche Weise die Zuschauer die Musik verkörpern können, während gleichzeitig eine traditionelle Beziehung zwischen Publikum und Darsteller aufrechterhalten wird. Dieser Weg von der kompositorischen Konzeption über Kontext und Beispiele bis hin zur Wahrnehmung durch das Publikum umreißt eine Lesart dieses Werks als erfahrungsorientiertes, verkörpertes Musiktheater aus einer Vielzahl von Perspektiven.

Audience Perception in Experiential Embodied Music Theatre: A Practice-based Case Study

Introduction

I only know I am (2019) is a work of music theatre – composed collaboratively by Litha Efthymiou and Martin Scheuregger – that borrows conventions from operatic as well as more experimental forms. The work sits relatively comfortably in the tradition of music theatre in Britain described by Michael Hall, which often features works which are chamber-operatic in scope, require minimal staging, and may be performed in concert settings with other non-theatrical works.[1] Written for an ensemble of clarinet, harp, violin and cello, with a soprano, actor and conductor, it is designed to be toured to non-standard venues and has been performed once as part of a pilot project (funded by St Hugh's Foundation for the Arts), and is currently being developed into a larger work.[2] In the development and composition process we focused on creating an immersive, site-specific experience that would elicit a visceral response to the subtle evocation of Lincoln's former asylum, and specific factors in broader asylum histories. The work promotes an embodied experience of the music and subject matter through musical, poetic and dramatic devices, and through a deliberate focus on space and place. In this article, we bring together a range of concepts – from theatre and music studies – to propose a particular reading of *I only know I am* that sits within a model of what we term 'experiential embodied music theatre' which we have conceived as a hybrid of the various referenced concepts.

Conceptual frame

A number of performance practices that have emerged over the years aim to engage audiences at an experiential level: site-specific performance, immersive theatre, and environmental theatre are of particular relevance here. In these forms, an audience's sentient experience is usually achieved through the use of

[1] Michael Hall, *Music Theatre in Britain 1960-1975*, Woodbridge 2015.
[2] We discuss the working method for this next stage elsewhere (Martin Scheuregger and Litha Efthymiou, "Composer-composer collaboration and the difficulty of intradisciplinarity," in: *Airea: Arts and Interdisciplinary Research* (2020) no. 2, pp. 23 -35, here p. 32).

performance space (which often displays no boundary between audience and performers), performance place (unusual venues and site-specific locations), and audience participation (audiences donning costume, undertaking movement, and participating in specified tasks). Music, which is utilised in productions operating within these genres, often plays a less prominent role in the facilitation of experiential engagement. This might be because, unlike performance space, location, and props, music is incorporeal, in that it cannot be seen or touched. However, the idea of the body's involvement in musical perception is now well documented, and a number of studies have demonstrated the significant degree to which the body facilitates in-depth musical understanding: the field of embodied music cognition[3] and the idea of virtual agency[4] demonstrate this in particular. Leman's work has been linked by some to embodiment and gesture in music theatre,[5] providing a particularly relevant frame here. Forms of 'covert' embodiment found in listener perception studies (the body is not always necessarily 'seen' to be obviously engaged) contrasts with the 'overt' forms demonstrated in the theatrical examples outlined above (where an audience member is seen to perform physical actions). Perspectives from these overt and covert forms of embodiment may be integrated to generate a reading of *I only know I am* that brings out its experiential dimension. We also question the ideas of passivity and activity in experiential performance[6] as we make a case for the embodied experiential dimension that comes from listening and observing without overt participation.

In this article our principal reference points are twofold: on one side, experiential performance practices – including immersive, site-specific and environmental theatre – are drawn upon; on the other, theories of embodiment from music theatre, and ideas of listener perception from embodied music cognition. We take a broadly phenomenological stance as our discussion focuses primarily on the experience of audience members. Our aim is to draw together

[3] Marc Leman, *Embodied Music Cognition and Mediation Technology,* Cambridge (MA) 2008.
[4] Robert S. Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music,* Indiana 2018.
[5] Catherine Laws, "Embodiment and Gesture in Performance: Practice-led Perspectives", in: *Artistic Experimentation in Music: An Anthology*, ed. Bob Gilmore and Darla Crispin, Leuven 2014, pp. 131–142.
[6] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, London 2011; Matthew Reason, "Participations on Participation. Research the 'active' theatre audience", in: *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 12, no. 1, 2015, pp. 271–280.

these areas in ways which might shed new light on embodiment and experience in music theatre, demonstrated through reference to the particularities of *I only know I am*. Our aim is to embrace the specifics of our own creative work whilst offering conclusions that may be applied more broadly elsewhere.

First, we consider the work's use of space, place and history in the context of environmental and site-specific theatre in order to understand the means by which it attempts to engage the audience. Taking this idea further, we consider the sonic place that is generated through the architecture of the work's form, supported by the narrative structure. We do this through a focus on the concepts of silencing and stasis, each of which have featured in our music before, and have strong links with the ideas that underpin the work here. From here, we consider the genre of immersive theatre, and draw a connection between this theatre practice, embodiment in music theatre, and embodied music cognition, so that we can understand the ways in which audience members may embody the music whilst maintaining a traditional audience-performer relationship. This journey from compositional conception, to context and examples, and through to audience perception outlines a reading of this work as experiential embodied music theatre from a variety of perspectives.

Space, place, and physical, sonic and narrative environments

In the following section we discuss how *I only know I am* aims to immerse its audience through practices related to environmental theatre and site-specific performance. Taking this a step further, we discuss the manner in which the place and space of the performance becomes a tool of immersion in itself, through the connections between the history of the space and the theme of the work. A link between this physical environment and the work's sonic environment is proposed, through the structures of the music – supported by the narrative structure – and the similarly immersive qualities that space and sound share. As in other focuses across this article, the links between musical and dramatic ideas here underpin our claims around reading the work through experiential and embodied perception.

Influence of environmental theatre and site-specific performance

In Schechner's environmental theatre – a term associated with his Performance Group, founded in 1968, and the title of his 1973 book – there is a focus on touch and audience-space/performance-space boundaries. The audience and performers of environmental theatre shared the same space, intermingling and interacting. Govan et al. highlight the significance of this staging in establishing an experiential encounter with the performance space, stating:

> For Schechner the relationship between the space and the performance/audience is a visceral experience. One in which the inside of the body perceives the space rather than the head dictating an organised response [...] the properties of the space seem to 'touch' the spectator and actors.[7]

The audience's position in the space facilitates the opportunity to feel the space around them, allowing them to form a relationship with it, as well as with the performers who inhabit it.

Taking this a step further, site-specific performance – a term found in various art forms – involves the creation of a work for a specific place, and may encourage audience members to form connections between the dramatic action, the venue in which it is taking place, and their own experiences. Harvie[8] states that the location of site-specific performance "can work as a potent mnemonic trigger, helping to evoke specific past times related to the place and time of performance and facilitating a negotiation between the meaning of those times".[9]

I only know I am borrows some of the conventions of site-specific performance and environmental theatre in how it is presented, and how immersion is achieved. The work can broadly be described as site-specific, as it was written for and performed at The Lawn, an historic former asylum building in the UK city of Lincoln. As a place within the Lincoln community, the Lawn is known for its history as an asylum: this is within very recent memory, as the hospital continued to treat patients late into the twentieth century, joining the National Health Service in 1948 and closing in 1985. Residents from the locality have memories of relatives being treated there. Furthermore, the specific location

[7] Emma Govan, Helen Nicholson, and Katie Normington. *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices*, Oxford 2007, p. 108.
[8] Jen Harvie, *Staging the UK,* Manchester 2005.
[9] Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance*, Basingstoke 2010, p. 9.

within the asylum complex in which the work was performed was originally a ballroom and performance space for the patients of the asylum. Now called "The Blue Room", this space has been operating as a performance venue since 2017, maintaining the original stage, using flexible seating (up to a capacity of around 100) and with a modest lighting rig.

Figure 1: Inside of the Blue Room including stage, © Steven Haddock.

The piece was presented in the Blue Room with the ensemble in full view (not under a stage or behind elements of the set) and the actor and singer moving from stationary positions flanking the ensemble, to various points within a sparse set (Fig. 2). Although a boundary between audience and performers exists, this boundary is fluid, as performers circle the audience and often encroach on their space. Like Schechner's Environmental Theatre, this staging can facilitate a sense of shared experience and the possibility of body contact between players and audience.[10] The body is engaged experientially through simple encounters with the building and its resonance.

[10] Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theatre*, New York 1973, p. 49.

Figure 2: Staging for *I only know I am*; clockwise from top right: view from behind soprano; final scene in centre of stage; actor using central space; ensemble, soprano and actor in the space, © Phil Crow.

The devices borrowed from site-specific performance and environmental theatre provide an insight into some of the ways we attempted to immerse our audience; however, it is through an understanding of the ways in which our narrative and sonic ideas interact with the site and the audience's relationship to it, as well as their and the performers' positions within it, that we can begin to demonstrate the work's potential as an experiential, embodied form of music theatre.

Place and space as immersive tool

As well as being created for a specific location (a place), the work is also about and informed by that location (its space). Govan et al. make a distinction between the fixed location of a place (in their example, a theatre building) and space, which is "unfixed, responsive and moulds to its occupants".[11] This follows Tuan who makes a similar distinction.[12] Tuan asserts that a physical space will become

[11] Govan et. al., *Making a performance* (see nt. 7), p. 106.
[12] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience,* Minneapolis 1977.

a social place through our experience of it: "what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value".[13]

Working with historical archaeologist Katherine Fennelly, we explored the aural environments of early-nineteenth-century asylums, and the practices developed in the pursuit of silence – to enable patient convalescence – such as encasing door locks in leather to muffle their sound.[14] We were interested in drawing upon these ideas to create the musical starting point for the work, and ultimately arrived at the twin concepts of musical silencing and musical stasis (discussed in more detail below) which reflect the aural environments described by Fennelly. The result is a musical work in which place is defined, in part, by a specific sonic environment that is intended to evoke a sense of these related temporal and spatial states (which we discuss in more detail below). In order to generate a narrative starting point, we turned to the poetry of John Clare: his sonnet *I am* and a separate poem *I am* provided the title and text for the work, alongside a letter sent by Clare whilst a patient at the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum.

Taken together, the sonic ideas (silencing and stasis), and the poetic and autobiographical texts reflect and reframe the space of the performance (a former asylum) to create a more immersive, but fictionalised, place. The interrelationships of these constituent elements, and the ways in which they are brought together in the mind of an audience member was important to our creation of immersion through place-making.

The fictionalisation of the space is in keeping with its specific history as a place of performance within the asylum: patients are known to have put on productions in the space, and so the sense of creating a place for presenting fictionalised work within the more 'real' surroundings of a mental health facility is already established. This is felt quite keenly in the space, as its history as a performance space is apparent: there is a stage, high ceilings and even a bar for interval refreshments. We believe this 'space within a place' gave us greater creative licence, as the space of the performance echoed its wider place whilst also

[13] Ibid., p. 6.
[14] Katherine Fennelly, "Out of sound, out of mind: noise control in early nineteenth-century lunatic asylums in England and Ireland", in: *World Archaeology* (2014) vol. 46 no. 3, p. 416–430.

acknowledging its fictionalised nature. (Put another way, if we were to have produced this work in a space where patients had been treated, we would have felt it more necessary to explicitly draw a line between fictionalised and documentary elements of the show.)

The history and associations of the place of *I only know I am* are the source of its dramatic and narrative content: by being in this space within a place that is well-known to the local community, the audience might be seen as playing a character in a way equivalent to (perhaps more powerful than) wearing a costume or a mask (as may happen in some forms of immersive theatre). In this way, the space is transformed into place through an intertextual exchange between music, text, the physical environment and the history of the space, in which embodied engagement becomes the catalyst for audience immersion.

Generating musical place

Whilst the physical space of the performance has the potential to generate immersion, so the architecture of the music – its form and structuring devices – can be seen as a type of space. Tuan refers to musical space at various points throughout his book, from sonic associations that suggest connections between sound and space – "sound itself can evoke spatial impressions. The reverberations of thunder are voluminous; the squeaking of chalk on slate is 'pinched' and thin."[15] – to large-scale ideas such as that "[a]rchitectural space […] has been called 'frozen music' – spacialized time".[16] We extend Tuan's ideas of place and space to *I only know I am*, arguing that the architecture of the music – its form and structure – presents a metaphorical *space*, which becomes a musical *place* once it is experienced by an audience member. This position follows logically from issues of embodied music cognition, and phenomenology, as it places the audience member's sentient experience at the heart of our understanding of the work.

Notwithstanding the need for air in physical space for sound to be produced, and space for musicians to perform, when we discuss space in music,

[15] Tuan, *Space and Place* (see nt. 12), p.15.
[16] Ibid., p. 118.

it is only a metaphor. The metaphor of movement in music – which Adlington questions[17] – echoes, and suggests, the metaphor of musical space: if music moves, it must do so through space. Cox writes about the metaphor of space in understanding music and, indeed, in almost all analytical conceptions of western art music, visual and spatial metaphors are used in conjunction with ideas of movement.[18] There is the important phenomenological question, however, of whether spatial structures are perceivable or important to a listener.

Peter Kivy's notion of architectonic listening – that we can listen to and comprehend the structure of a musical work[19] – is useful here, as we believe the musical structures of *I only know I am* do have an impact on an audience member. We also acknowledge, however, the concatenationist view of Levinson – with whom Kivy has engaged in fulsome debate[20] – that we hear and understand music through moment-to-moment connections.[21] We do not aim to make a phenomenological claim for either approach in relation to *I only know I am*, but we instead propose a reading that takes into account the impact of the work's structure on an audience member, through the lens of space and place. The idea of musical space might be usefully broadened to the idea of an aural environment which the work creates: a 'soundworld' within which it operates.

Tuan's idea of a place being generated through our social interaction with a space echoes ideas of audience interaction with musical and dramatic works, and can be extended to reflect a series of place-forming parameters (Fig. 3) in which the engagement of an audience member is akin to Tuan's idea of social engagement of place-making. These all reflect an embodied form of engagement, discussed elsewhere in this article, and underline the idea that *I only know I am* is an example of experiential embodied music theatre.

[17] Robert Adlington, "Moving beyond motion: Metaphors for changing sound", in: *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* (2003) vol. 128 no. 2, pp. 297–318.
[18] Arnie Walter Cox, *The Metaphoric Logic of Musical Motion and Space*, Dissertation, University of Oregon 1999.
[19] Peter Kivy. "Music in Memory and Music in the Moment", in: id., *New essays on musical understanding*, Oxford 2001, pp. 183–217.
[20] Notably in ibid.; Jerrold Levinson, "Concatenationism, architectonicism, and the appreciation of music", in: *Revue internationale de philosophie* (2006) no. 4, pp. 505–514.
[21] Jerrold Levinson, *Music in the Moment*, Cornell 1997.

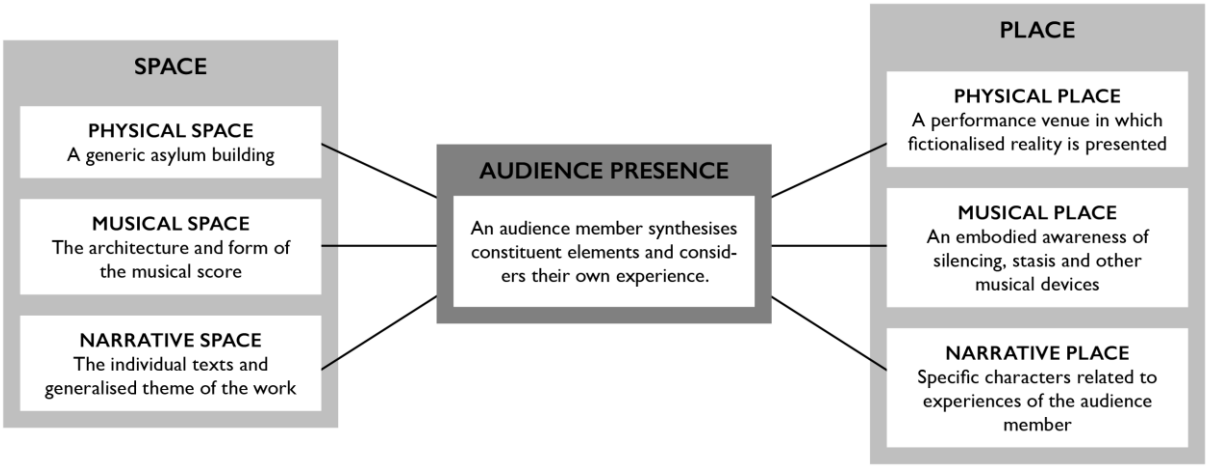

Figure 3: Turning space into place.

Structure as musical place

The macro structure of the work reflects the division of the creative process: it is in two compositionally distinct parts (part one composed by Scheuregger; part two by Efthymiou), joined by shorter sections (devised during the rehearsal process and using extracts of music from the two scores). The authors have discussed the collaborative process in detail elsewhere[22] and, although separate compositional voices were employed, a sense of musical cohesion is achieved through similar musical languages (non-tonal, modernist and relatively expressionist in character). Figure 4 is an outline of the work's structure, with durations taken from the first performance.

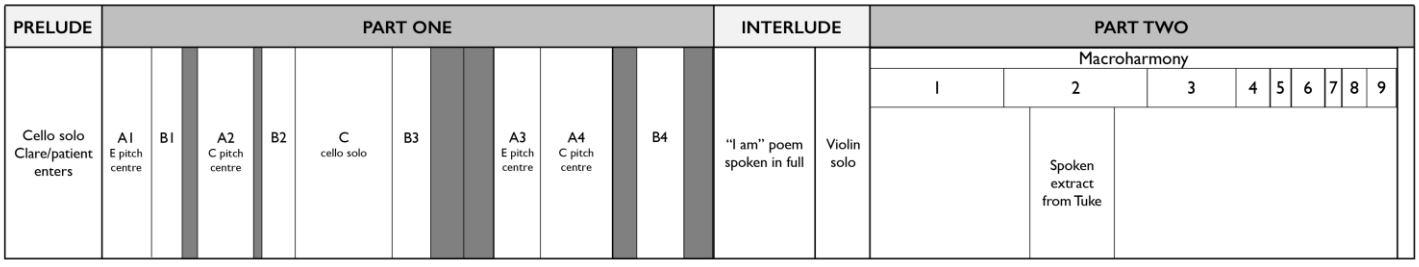

Figure 4: Structure of *I only know I am*.

[22] Scheuregger and Efthymiou, "Composer-composer collaboration" (see nt. 2).

Across the work, a sense of musical place is established through repetition of various kinds: in part one, sections are repeated in various places; in part two, the same pitch material is repeated extensively. This recurrence of formal material is employed as a place-making device.

In part one, distinct spaces are created and then moved between as if moving in and out of different rooms. The form is articulated primarily through switching between two section types (labelled A and B in Fig. 4), with a third material type constructed around two alternating chords. The cello solo used as the prelude, forms a central plateau and is mostly self-contained in terms of musical material. The A sections each start with a single pitch (either E or C) used colouristically across the ensemble, before a melodic outburst introduces greater harmonic depth: there is a sense of being stuck in a single place. This mirrors the narrative at these points where, as discussed below, the patient/Clare is repeating fragments of the same short letter. The B sections each begin on a G in the soprano part and are more melodic in character. There is a greater sense of momentum here, reflecting the more lucid narrative portrayed by the soprano at these points.

A sense of stasis is intended here and is generated in the material that is used – harmonically non-developing or using repeated gestures – but more importantly in the form that is generated. By persistently moving in and out of a limited number of sections, the music appears not to move forward, instead rotating around the same ideas again and again. A sense of routine is generated as there is the opportunity for an audience member to become familiar with the musical space which the work generates and, following Tuan, form associations that create place. The spatial sense of the form – the notion of moving in and out of the same few rooms – is reinforced in the dramatic narrative of the work. Specifically, through the text and the ways it is used to generate two temporalities for the actor and soprano.

The libretto of *I only know I am* is constructed from three extant texts from John Clare: two poems (sonnet *I am*, and a separate poem *I am* from 1844/45) and a letter from Clare dated March 8th 1860, written whilst he was a patient at Northampton General Lunatic Asylum, quote in full here:

> Dear Sir
> I am in a Madhouse & quite forget your Name or who you are[.] [Y]ou must excuse me for I have nothing to commu[n]icate or tell of & why I am shut up I don[']t know
> I have nothing to say so I conclude
> Yours respectfully
> John Clare

The prosaic, although highly emotive, 'I am' of this letter (which tells us 'I am here and cannot do this or that') is contrasted with the existential 'I am' of the two poems (where the poet considers his mental state with greater nuance). The first stanza of *I am* reads:

> I am—yet what I am none cares or knows;
> My friends forsake me like a memory lost:
> I am the self-consumer of my woes—
> They rise and vanish in oblivious host,
> Like shadows in love's frenzied stifled throes
> And yet I am, and live—like vapours tossed

The similarly named sonnet, opens with the lines:

> I feel I am — I only know I am,
> And plod upon the earth, as dull and void:
> Earth's prison chilled my body with its dram
> Of dullness, and my soaring thoughts destroyed[.]

The two poems on one hand, and the letter on the other, represent two voices and, more specifically, the two 'times' of Clare: the 1844/45 of *I am* represents a more lucid and contemplative character from an earlier period than the man writing the letter of 1860. More broadly, these two times can be considered as 'before' and 'after' states: whether they are either side of hospitalisation, diagnosis, or recovery, is left intentionally ambiguous.

The text of the letter is spoken by the actor in a fragmented form across part one, never heard in its entirety, instead pieced together through repetition. The character continues to circle back on their thoughts as if reconstructing the letter. The text has no sense of temporal narrative and, like much of the music of this section, is formally static: the actor speaks his words as if he can hear nothing else in the diegesis and is stuck, aware only of his present, tangible experience. In

contrast, the soprano sings a mixture of lines taken from the two poems, set in a variety of ways, ranging from recitative-like repeated pitches, to stepwise melodic lines, to angular phrases. She reflects the earlier, more lucid Clare and represents a cerebral reading of his environment that appears unreachable to the actor – representing a patient/Clare character – whose experience is stuck in a timeless present. The tension between the characters' temporalities provides the dramatic basis of the first part of the show which can be seen as cyclical, static and futile. As with the music, the formation of the text allows the audience to move through different narrative spaces, becoming more and more familiar with these as the piece progresses. These ostensibly abstract spaces begin to transform into secure, memorable places each time the audience member is confronted with them. When the sonic and narrative spaces are considered together, the extent to which a growing sense of stasis might be evoked, and comprehended by a listener, becomes clear.

In part two, the formation of place is achieved differently: whereas in part one, block-like changes of section created the musical scaffolding, here the harmonic changes create a structure which supports the piece. The harmonic structure is formed of nine different pitch sets (Fig. 5). Each pitch set can be said to operate as a macroharmony, described by Tymoczko as a collection of notes that is heard – to the exclusion of all other notes – over a span of musical time.[23] The macroharmonic progressions create a sense of decay that operates at a formal level to populate the entire of part two with a sense of musical silencing. The macroharmonies diminish in pitch content – reducing by one each time – as the sections they appear in become shorter as well. The diminishing time span of each macroharmony can be perceived as a gradual breaking down of the stabilising backbone of the piece as the life of each becomes increasingly shorter.

[23] Dmitri Tymoczko, *A Geometry of Music: Harmony and Counterpoint in the Extended Common Practice*, Oxford 2011, p. 4. Efthymiou has previously utilised macroharmonic progressions to generate static harmonic fields (Litha Efthymiou and Emma Hornby, "New Music Inspired by Old Hispanic Chant", in: *Context Journal of Music Research* (2019), vol. 45, pp. 61–73).

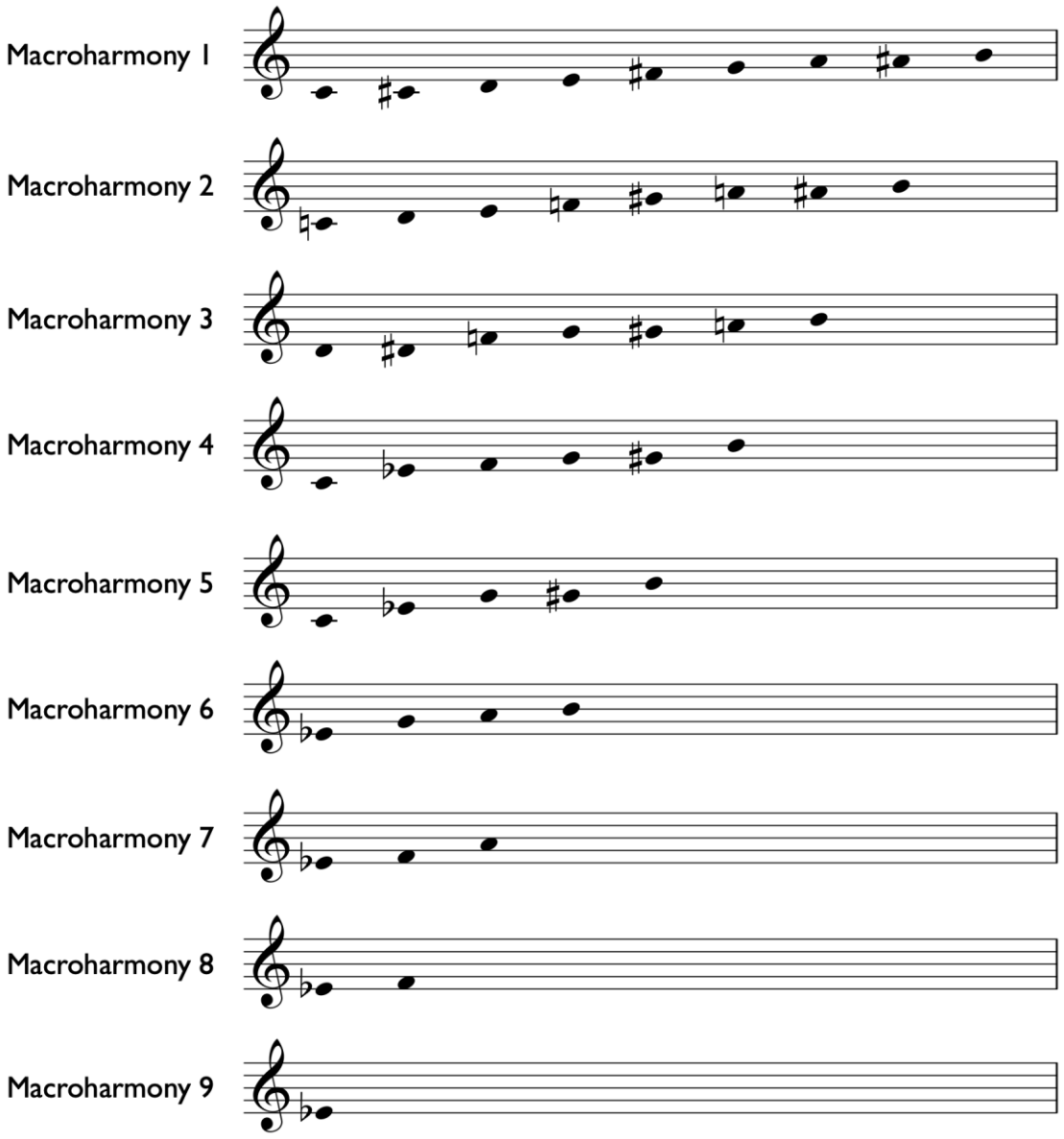

Figure 5: Macroharmonies in *I only know I am*, part two.

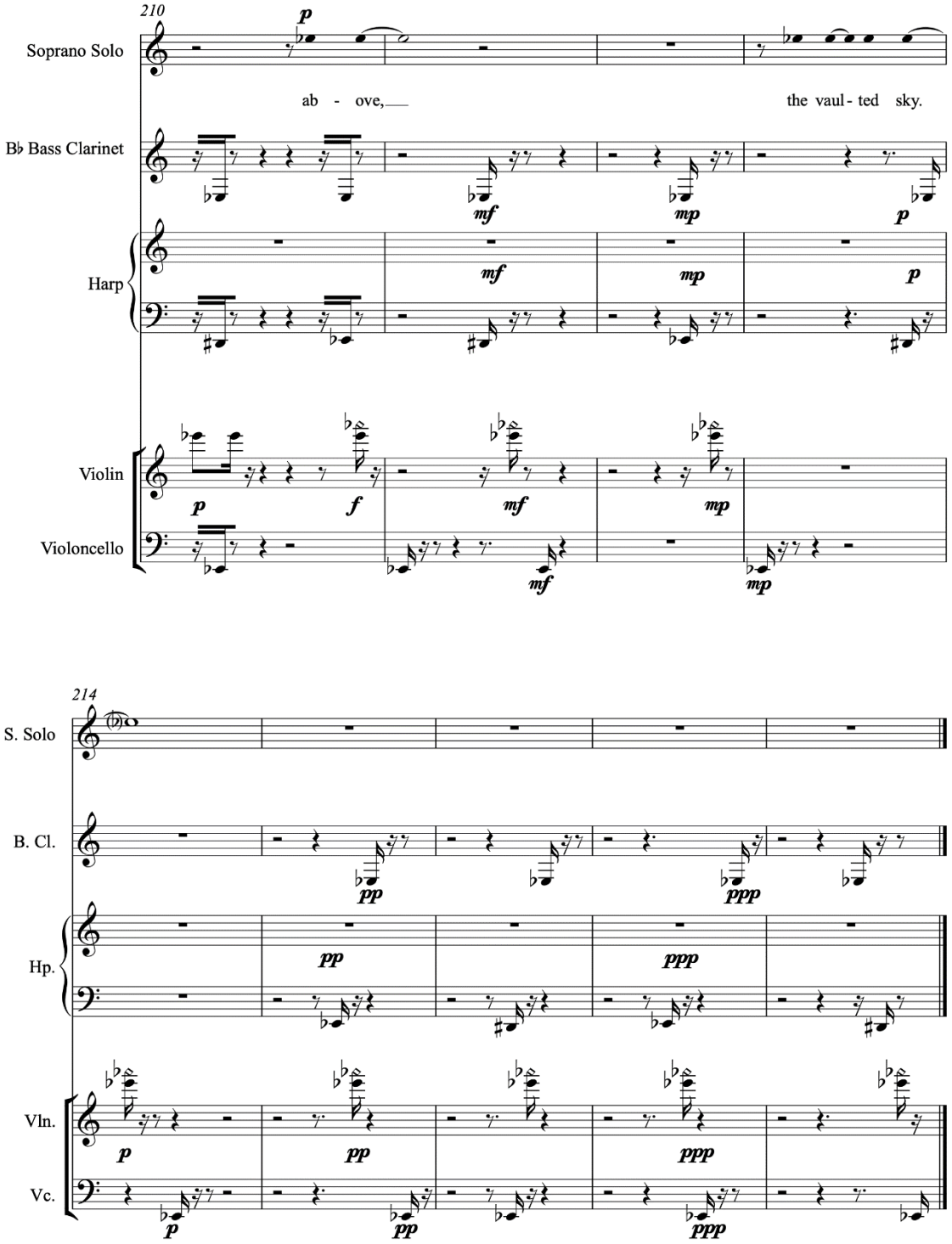

Figure 6: Single-note macroharmony in *I only know I am*, part two, bars 210–218.

The macroharmonic structure can be understood as a volatile, unstable feature of the work's architecture, undermining any sense of strength and solid underpinning (arguably the usual function of a work's harmonic foundation). This volatility reaches a climax at the end of the piece, where the macroharmony

is formed of only one note, which itself undergoes a process of decay as it is subjected to a dynamic trajectory that ranges from forte to pianississimo, as seen in Figure 6. The particular detail of each macroharmony is unlikely to be perceived directly, but, following Kivy, we believe that the resulting sense of gradual silencing can be felt.

The sensation of silencing might be further compounded when the music is considered alongside the dramatic action unfolding in the same instant. One part of the work's narrative focuses on the ways in which silence was achieved in the asylum by a famous nineteenth-century reformer, Samuel Tuke, whose work is documented in a study carried out in 1813.[24] Tuke is depicted at work, carrying out technical experiments with the aim of stifling the overwhelmingly harsh metallic sounds of the asylum building, which his study reported as having a negative effect on patient convalescence. He is seen experimenting with encasing door locks in leather, stifling the harsh jangling noise of keys, and inserting soft floorboards to the walkways of the building, in pursuit of silence. He drops a set of keys and listens carefully for their resonance and, eventually, he speaks lines from his documented journal, alluding to his goals for reforming the aural environment of the asylum.

The musical journey, supported by the dramatic action, outlines a tangible, architectonic structure – analogous to a half-dome – which metaphorically surrounds the listener. Tuan draws a connection between architectural and musical space, and the work of architect Steven Holl embodies this idea rather fully. Holl notes "Music, like architecture, is an immersive experience – it surrounds you. One can turn away from a painting or a work of sculpture, while music and architecture engulf the body in space".[25] Through the repetition and diminution of the pitch material, the work may be seen to close in as it progresses and, more generally, creates a sonic environment defined by pitch material that becomes simpler (and more recognisable) as the piece progresses to its conclusion. Just as in part one, a sense of routine and stasis is generated through

[24] Samuel Tuke, *Description of the Retreat, an Institution Near York for Insane Persons of the Society of Friends*, York 1813.
[25] Steven Holl, "The Architectonics of Music", https://www.stevenholl.com/architectonics-of-music (accessed: 10 March 2021).

cycling around repeated material, so the form in part two can be understood through an embodied sense of place, as material of increasing familiarity closes in on the listener until all but one pitch is left.

Immersive theatre and embodying music

In this section we consider how understandings of embodiment and gesture in forms of theatre and music theatre might offer a frame for understanding both the overt embodiment in the action on stage, and the covertly embodied experience of the audience. We then propose a correspondence between the experiential qualities of immersive theatre (as an overtly corporeal from of embodiment), and the theories of embodied music cognition (where the involvement of the body is more covert).

The distinction between active and passive participation is discussed by Reason, who points towards two broadly contrasting views.[26] Given *I only know I am* does not involve overt audience participation, it is worth considering how 'passive' audiences may not be as inactive as one might assume. Reason cites Jacques Rancière's assertion that being a spectator "is in and of itself an emancipated position from which the audience is empowered to produce their own interpretations".[27] Claire Bishop similarly questions the assumed connection between a detached viewer and disengaged passivity.[28] It may be concluded that, rather than generating immersion, interactivity in theatre may be an alienating process that requires an audience member to (perhaps self-consciously) focus on their own actions rather than on the work or environment they are presented with. In his seminal work on musical meaning and listener perception, Eric Clarke questions the idea of a passive listener entirely.[29] Toelle and Sloboda take Clarke as a starting point, citing Reason and others to generate a critique of passivity that frames a study of participation in two contemporary classical works.[30]

[26] Matthew Reason, "Participations on Participation. Research the 'active' theatre audience", in: *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* (2015) vol. 12 no. 1, pp. 271–280.
[27] Ibid., p. 274.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Eric Clarke, *Ways of Listening*, Oxford 2005.
[30] Jutta Toelle and John A. Sloboda, "The audience as artist? The audience's experience of participatory music", in: *Musicae Scientiae* (2019)),

What we see in this literature – which we can only outline here – is a perspective in which embodied engagement need not be tied to so-called active participation or listening. In fact, a 'passive' audience may be able to engage with the work through an embodied way in a powerfully experiential manner: it is this sort of covert embodiment upon which the work is built.

Overt embodiment in immersive theatre and experimental music theatre

In discussing embodiment in performance, an important distinction can be made between two types of work: those that aim to engage their *audiences* in an embodied experience, and those that engage the *performers*. In the various forms of theatre explored earlier, embodiment is passed to the audience, whose actions are as important as those of the defined actors/performers. Other forms of theatre take audience embodiment further, such as immersive theatre. In Machon's words immersive theatre "place[s] the audience at the heart of the work."[31] Immersive theatre gives its audience a sensual experience, by providing stimulation of most, if not all, of the senses. To do this, works usually place audiences within situations rather than presenting situations before them[32], encouraging them to touch, taste, and explore elaborate environments, "address[ing] their bodily presence in [those] environment[s] and its effect on sense making."[33] In her description of experience, Machon states that it "should be understood in its fullest sense, to feel *feeling* – to undergo."[34] Audience role-playing may be encouraged through the wearing of costumes or masks, the audience may be expected to engage with actors and other audience members, and they may even undertake tasks (as seen in examples from Punchdrunk's work, such as *Woyzeck 12* and *The Crash of the Elysium*), thereby directly influencing a work's trajectory.

Central to the immersive theatre aesthetic is somatic engagement: the spectator's physical body and its interaction with other spectators, performers

https://doi.org/10.1177/1029864919844804, (accessed: 22 June 2021), pp. 69-70.
[31] Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, Basingstoke 2013, p. 22.
[32] Ibid., p. 26.
[33] Gareth White, "On Immersive Theatre", in: *Theatre Research International* (2012) vol. 37 no. 3, pp. 221–235.
[34] Machon, *Immersive theatres* (see nt. 31), p. 22, (emphasis in the original).

and the performance space. It is through haptic and bodily engagement in tasks, actions, movements, and wearing costumes, that the spectator engages viscerally with a piece. Bodily engagement of this kind is overt. It allows a direct awareness of the involvement of the senses and provides an immediacy of experience.

In contrast, some modern forms of music theatre tend to engage the performers, rather than the audience, in overt embodiment. In experimental music theatre, for example, embodiment takes place primarily on the stage: this is a form of practice in which sound production and gestures are often interlinked through a conscious consideration of the performer's body, including their voice. However, there is a distinction to be made between forms of music theatre. Nicholas Till distinguishes between "new American music theatre"[35] and a European tradition whose practitioners "are always profoundly aware of the burden of history" and may be seen as working in a post-operatic paradigm.[36] Removing these geographical associations, we might consider Christian Utz's tripartite categorisation which makes a similar distinction between music theatre in an operatic tradition, that in an experimental vein ("music theatre that explicitly rejected the operatic style and institutions in favour of smaller performative works, influenced by performance art") and a third form in which there is "a synthesis between the first two categories, and which is similar to post-dramatic theatre".[37]

Following this, and distinctions made by Björn Heile, we differentiate between music theatre in an operatic tradition and 'experimental music theatre' in which "elements inherent in the music making are the action, and there is no (actual or virtual) separation between stage and instrumental ensemble, nor are there dramatic roles."[38] *I only know I am* does not draw extensively on experimental music theatre practices, or immersive theatre, and uses the performing bodies (an actor and a singer) in dramatic/narrative roles, leaving instrumentalists as functional and not consciously dramatic. In immersive

[35] Nicholas Till, "Investigating the entrails: post-operatic music theatre in Europe", in: *Contemporary theatres in Europe: a critical companion*, ed. Joe Kelleher and Nicholas Ridout, Abingdon 2006, pp. 34–46, here p. 34.
[36] Ibid., p. 34.
[37] Brandon Farnsworth, *Curating Contemporary Music Festivals*, Bielefeld 2020.
[38] Björn Heile, "Towards a theory of experimental music theatre: 'showing doing', 'non-matrixed performance' and 'metaxis'", in: *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Western Art*, ed. Yael Kaduri, Oxford 2016, pp. 335–355, here p. 335.

theatre, the audiences' relationship to the performers and space is one of the primary elements of experiential engagement. The lack of boundary promotes a haptic relationship to the space, as it does in site-specific and environmental theatre, discussed earlier. Touch, role-play, and engendering active decision-making opportunities enable audiences to become fully submerged in the action. As we have seen in other forms of theatre, it is the body's sensual experience in space that is fundamental to this form of experiential performance. In experimental music theatre, the musicians themselves embody the music. The influence of these forms is clear to see in some aspects of *I only know I am*: engagement with a specific site and a subtle blurring of the boundary between audience and performers. It differs in one major respect, however, which is to do with the role of the body. It is not through touch, role-play, and physical undertaking of activities that embodied engagement takes place, but rather through the act of embodied listening, placing the music at the heart of the work and the audience's visceral engagement with it at the centre of the experiential dimension.

Covert musical embodiment

The immersive power of somatic and haptic engagement echoes the 'virtual' embodiment of musical features that is central to embodied music cognition and virtual agency as discussed by Leman and Hatten respectively.[39] He describes this process as embodied music cognition. He argues that we engage with music and make sense of it through our bodies. In his words: "musical involvement is based on an embodied simulation or imitation of moving sonic forms".[40] There is also neurological basis for the view that the perception of music involves the body, highlighted by Damasio. He states "the essence of a feeling may not be an elusive mental quality attached to an object, but rather the direct perception of a specific landscape: that of the body."[41]

[39] Leman, *Embodied Music Cognition* (see nt. 3); Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency* (see nt. 4).
[40] Leman, *Embodied Music Cognition* (see nt. 3), p. 43.
[41] Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain,* London 2006, p. xxiv.

Like Leman, Cox suggests that imitation of musical sound in the body is one of the ways in which humans engage with music.[42] He argues that mimetic engagement is not always conscious or overt. Covert, unconscious, and involuntary imitation can also take place, as he makes clear here: "whenever we are engaged in listening, normally we are mimetically engaged whether we are aware of it or not".[43] Cox acknowledges that different styles of music invite different forms of mimetic behaviour but no music resists mimetic engagement altogether. He also states that composers can create mimetic invitation by, for example, creating music with singable lines that are mostly diatonic, with stepwise movement and limited range, and with very simple rhythms.[44] He is quick to assert, however, that much more abstract music can also invite mimetic engagement and, therefore, "mimetic invitation never attenuates to zero".[45] The importance of evidence for these mimetic effects neurologically is reinforced by Laws and Heile who make a particular link between ideas from Leman and Cox, and music theatre practices.[46]

Our music falls somewhat outside of the forms of music that may engage listeners in overt mimetic behaviour – since it does not display regular metrical structures, memorable diatonic lines, or predictable climaxes – but we argue that the formal structure, discussed earlier, thematic repetitions, diminishing lines, and sustained passages combine to create a palpable effect of silencing and stasis, which engage audiences in covert embodiment of the music. Examples can be found in both parts of the work.

In part two it is the gradual decay of thematic material in the foreground structure that is particularly pertinent. There are three main melodic cells that are utilised, the first of which is seen below (Fig. 7). This cell is established in the piece through extensive repetition. It appears in different rhythmic configurations, on various instruments of the ensemble – in both middle and upper voices – and is clearly foregrounded each time it is presented, through its

[42] Arnie Walter Cox, *Music Embodied Cognition: Listening, Moving, Feeling and Thinking*, Bloomington 2017, p.11.
[43] Ibid., p.15.
[44] Ibid., pp.47–48.
[45] Ibid., p. 48.
[46] Laws, "Embodiment and Gesture in Performance" (see nt. 5); Björn Heile, "New music theatre and theories of embodied cognition", in: *New Music Theatre in Europe: Transformations Between 1955-1975*, ed. Robert Adlington, Abingdon 2019, pp. 273–293.

prominent position in the texture and its relatively high dynamic level. The extensive repetitions of this cell allow a listener to form a strong sense of its angular melodic shape. This shape – imprinted in the ear of the listener through extensive repetition – may be conceptualised as physical movement. This corresponds to Cox's notion of mimetic motor imagery,[47] in which observers/listeners of music imagine physical movement, – either of performers playing, or other physical engagement – as part of their own embodied engagement with what they are hearing.

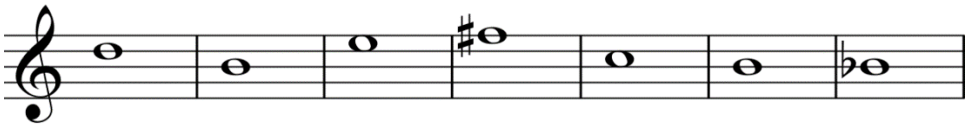

Figure 7: Melodic cell 1 from *I only know I am*, part two.

This sense of embodied listening goes further still as the cell develops. Soon after it has been established, a process of decay begins to take place in the form of note-omission. An example can be seen in bar 21, where the cell is reduced by one note in the violin, then again by two notes in the clarinet at bar 25, and so on, until it is reduced to only two notes in the harp by bar 31. This process of melodic decay is presented at various points across the work with each of the three cells. The repetition of the full cells at the start of part two prepares the groundwork for a palpable sense of decay at the point at which the cells are cut short, because of the level of expectation that it set up. When the repetition is not fully realised, a listener may be left feeling the loss of the severed notes aurally, but also through the body as they continue to engage in covert mimetic motor imagery through the embodied listening that these gestural cells induce.

Beyond theories of mimesis, it is also useful to consider the related concept of virtual agency in music. In his exploration of this, Hatten makes a distinction between actual agents of music – composers and performers – and virtual agents, that emanate from within the music, which exist in the imagination of the listener. Hatten argues that virtual agents have intentions and perform actions, shaping the harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic parameters of a musical work.

[47] Cox, *Music Embodied Cognition* (see nt. 43), p. 12.

These virtual agents, he suggests, have analogous human movements.[48] Here, musical perception is not embodied in the way that Cox and Leman describe, but rather conceptualised using the body as a tool for understanding. The separation of mind and body in music theatre – the "persistent Cartesian tendencies," as Catherine Laws puts it – is questioned by Laws, who considers "developments in phenomenology, neuroscience, and body theory, [through which] a more specific and significant context emerges, one that lies at the heart of artistic research, at the nexus between doing and understanding".[49] This doing-understanding paradigm may be extended to the particular ways in which sonic *musical* gestures, such as a collective crescendo – that is, Hatten's virtual agents – might work in similar ways to physical gestures. When these ideas are combined in *I only know I am* – which uses highly gestural music alongside gesture in a more performative way (particularly in the actor's movements in part two) – a broader view of gesture and embodiment may be generated. Music theatre is particularly able to generate meaning through its combination of sonic, textual, visual, spatial and movement-based expression: "Put simply, gesture blurs the distinction between movement and meaning".[50]

Several musical gestures act as virtual agents in part one. Here, a range of musical gestures suggest mimetic responses that align to the underlying idea of stasis. In the recurring A thematic group shown in Figure 8, an E is repeated across three strings of the harp (through a harmonic and the enharmonically equivalent F-flat) and echoed in other instruments in a static gesture that recurs across the piece. The tension that may be mimetically embodied in this gesture is briefly relaxed through a gesture that departs from the single pitch centre: in bar 6, dynamics, rhythm and pitch 'open out' concurrently to suggest a breaking free from the stasis of the opening. The ripples of this outburst are felt in similar gestures in the other instruments. The cumulative effect of these gestures may elicit a mimetic response, as a visceral sense of disrupting a static surface is felt.

[48] Hatten, A *Theory of Virtual Agency* (see nt. 4), p. 67.
[49] Laws, "Embodiment and Gesture in Performance" (see nt. 5), p.131.
[50] Ibid., p. 133

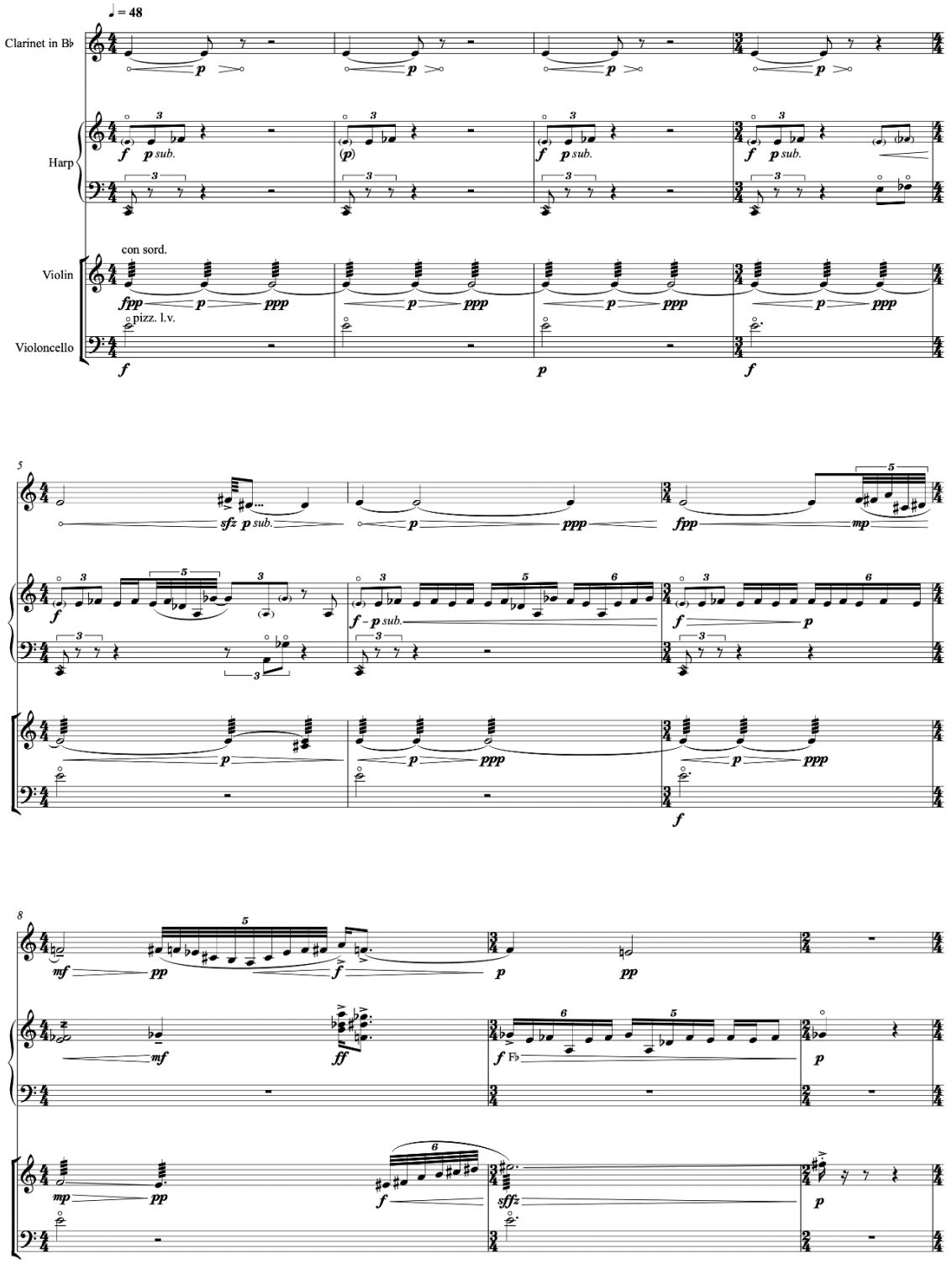

Figure 8: Part one, extract of thematic group A, bars 1–10, instrumental parts only (sounding pitch).

This is a prime example of virtual agency and, indeed, the image of a pebble being dropped in a pond – a static surface being broken then subsiding to stasis again

– is suggested. The gestural language in this short example is found across the work with similarly mimetic effects.

* * *

Audiences of music theatre works may engage in embodied experiences in an overt way, and similarly overt examples of embodiment may be seen on stage. However, as has been demonstrated here, covert forms of embodiment can be powerful too. In *I only know I* am this is seen more clearly through a gestural musical language to elicit a mimetic response, and due to the careful deployment of repeating and varying musical ideas that a listener may latch on to. This particular – quite subtle – form of embodiment departs from that found in other areas of theatre and performance, but, when drawn together with the other immersive devices discussed earlier, forms a distinct impression of what we have termed experiential embodied music theatre.

Conclusions

We have set out here a reading of the music theatre work *I only know I am* as an example of experiential embodied music theatre, a term which intentionally signals links with embodiment in music theatre, embodied music cognition and experiential forms of performance. Borrowing from understandings of environmental theatre and site-specific performance, we have proposed ways in which the histories and associations of the performance space have come together with our choices of text and musical devices to create a specific narrative place. This place-making is contingent on the audience members having a degree of narrative agency – they can form their own connections and, in a way, tell their own story – and being corporeally engaged. Considering place and space further, we have extended ideas of musical structure and space, and proposed a reading of the work's musical elements as creating various musical places which are, once again, contingent on an audience's active engagement. We suggest that the ideas of place put forward here are primarily engaged with through forms of embodied listening and engagement with the narrative in a corporeal manner. Through reference to embodied music cognition and virtual agency, we have furthermore

shown how certain musical devices can engender embodied listening, in particular through the use of a gestural musical language which elicits mimetic gestural responses in a listener.

We do not claim that *I only know I am* is unique in the devices it employs or the effect it may have on an audience, but instead lay claim to an originality in the application of the range of theoretical approaches in both the creation of the work – we are, after all, its composers – and the analysis presented here. By bringing together a diversity of perspectives from theatre studies, to listener perception, to understandings of space and place, a wide-ranging phenomenological view is offered that may be fruitfully applied in further studies of contemporary music theatre and potentially a wider range of performance work.