

CONVERTING SOUNDS
A REPORT ON A WORKSHOP
BY ANNA LEWTON-BRAIN

Converting Sounds was a three-day workshop, June 5-7 2017, that brought together Shakespeare scholars, historical musicologists, singers, musicians, actors, a theatre director, an opera librettist, and a composer at the Guildhall School of Music in London. With Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* and a *Much Ado* opera-in-progress as their double centerpiece, the members of the workshop united scholarship and artistic practice in order to develop new questions and ideas about the conversational power of music and poetry, to think about what happens to theatrical poetry when it is reconceived as opera, and to engage with Shakespeare and his play as their principal conversation partners about how music and poetry can transform individuals and recreate the world itself. After two days of intensive music and theatre workshops, scene work, and group discussions, members of the workshop spent the third day planning, rehearsing, and performing a workshop-presentation for a public audience at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

The members of the workshop:

1. Quincy Armorer, Actor; Artistic Director, Black Theatre Workshop, Montreal
2. Patricia Badir, Professor of English, University of British Columbia
3. Jacoba Barber-Rozema, Singer, Montreal
4. Elisabeth Boudreault, Singer, Montreal
5. Theo Boyce, Actor, London
6. Robbie Carpenter, Actor, London
7. Anthony Dawson, Professor of English Emeritus, University of British Columbia
8. David Dolan, Head of the Centre for Creative Performance & Classical Improvisation, Guildhall School of Music & Drama
9. Elaine Fellows, Actor, London
10. Iain Fenlon, Professor of Historical Musicology, University of Cambridge
11. Lindsey Fillingham, Flautist; D.Mus candidate, Guildhall School of Music & Drama
12. James Garner, Composer, London
13. Patrick Hansen, Director, Opera McGill
14. Kaffe Keating, Actor, London
15. Amanda Kellock, Artistic Director, Repercussion Theatre, Montreal
16. Bethan Langford, Singer, London
17. Anna Lewton-Brain, PhD student, English and Music, McGill University
18. Fran Regis, Actor, London
19. Collin Shay, Singer, London
20. Helen Smith, Reader in Renaissance Literature and Director of the Centre for Renaissance and Early Modern Studies, University of York
21. Jonah Spungin, Singer, Montreal
22. Valerie Traub, Adrienne Rich Distinguished University Professor of English and Women's Studies, University of Michigan
23. Bradley Travis, Singer, London
24. Ben Wainwright, Actor, London
25. Paul Yachnin, Tomlinson Professor of Shakespeare Studies, McGill University

After early morning coffee and chat at the Silk Street Café on June 5th, the workshop began with formal introductions (going around the circle) and then Paul Yachnin opened by situating Shakespeare

and his play, *Much Ado About Nothing*, in the larger historical context of the early modern period, an age that saw the growth and multiplication of different forms of radical transformation. Amanda Kellock clarified that the theatrical elements of the workshop (actors, theatre director, and dramaturges) were there in service of the development of this new opera by James Garner (composer) and Patrick Hansen (librettist), but also were there to deepen their own understanding by connecting with the practices of others.

Patrick Hansen then spoke about the origins of the opera project, and about his own personal connection to the play text. Patrick said he chose this play to develop into an opera libretto because he was attracted to the lightness of the play and was interested in whether the opera could be light and funny. Valerie Traub asked a question about the darker, misogynistic side of the play. This was the first of many exchanges between artists and scholars where critical approaches to the play put pressure on artists' interpretations, and reciprocally, where scholars were reminded by the artists about what is most essentially important about the artwork: its capacity to move a person emotionally and intellectually.

David Dolan started us off with a wonderful music and theatre improvisation workshop that demonstrated some of the semantic registers of music and the musical registers of speech. David's interest was to look into the music of speech when we are talking spontaneously and openly to one another. He usefully introduced the Aristotelian terms of rhetoric: melody, rhythm, and timbre of speech, and drew a comparison to the changes (conversions) over time in pitch, intensity, duration (rhythm, meter, suspension), and timbre that are the raw materials that make music come to life and that constitute its esthetic, stylistic, and emotional content (both conscious and subconscious).

David talked about de Saussure's assertion that speech intonation is a parallel investigative arena to linguistics that linguistics can't begin to map out or take account of. Moreover, David stressed, it is the music behind speech that determines the essence of what we really mean. David was particularly interested in a form of musical-linguistic irony: when there is a conflict between what is being said and how it is being said. Because auditors immediately connect emotionally to the *how*, it is always the *how* that takes over the meaning of the word or phrase. To demonstrate these ideas, or look into them in action, David had flautists and actors improvise short scenes of conversation together. They began by mirroring each other, with a musician responding to an actor's emotional outburst. In other skits, the music began and the actors and musicians had whole conversations. This initial musical improvisatory work continued and developed over the three days of the workshop, and was integrated into the workshop-performance on day three in Helen Smith's scholarly interlude on religious conversion, or "turning Turk," which was dramatically accompanied by Lindsey Fillingham improvising on the flute. David's advice to James and our team overall in terms of the work on the opera was to not let the music become a decoration or a background to the text. Music can startle language into vital life. Sometimes, through musical intonation, a word can open into a whole world of meaning.

After this inspiring beginning, the actors then did their first read-through of act 2, scene 3—one of the three scenes that were the focus of the three days (2.3, 3.1, and 4.1). During this initial read-through we experimented with having flute players take over the lines and roles of various characters in the scene, further demonstrating the semantic and communicative capacities of (non-verbal) music. This rehearsal also offered an opportunity for the group to discuss the play in general. Amanda Kellock told us that, for her, *Much Ado About Nothing* is fundamentally about the end of war and the beginnings of love. That prompted discussion about the wars of religion and their possible contextual role for the play. The work on 2.3 continued after lunch, with particular attention paid to the functioning of the

song, “Sigh No More, Ladies” that Balthazar sings. The song makes an indirect ethical case for why Benedick should love Beatrice, and is very much at the heart of his conversion in the play:

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more.
Men were deceivers ever,
One foot in sea, and one on shore,
To one thing constant never.
Then sigh not so, but let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into hey nonny, nonny.

Sing no more ditties, sing no more
Of dumps so dull and heavy.
The fraud of men was ever so
Since summer first was leafy.
Then sigh not so, but let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into hey, nonny, nonny.

The words of the song also comment on the theme of love and war that Amanda had pointed out earlier.

The song, which had been the centerpiece for discussion in the theatrical rehearsal, then became the first piece of James Garner and Patrick Hansen’s opera to be sounded at the workshop. James set the song as an air for countertenor. James spoke about his decision to make Balthazar a kind of choric figure set slightly outside the main action. In opera, one is of course already in a musical landscape, so James’s challenge was to set the song “Sigh no more” in such a way that it rose above that aural soundscape. He aimed to accomplish this in two ways: by setting the melody and rhythms in what he called a “square” or rhythmically and melodically simple style that contrasted with the rhythmically and melodically complex writing for the other roles, and by making Balthazar a countertenor. Collin Shay performed the song. The male falsetto voice helps to set the song apart from the other male voices in the scene that sing in their modal voice. There was some discussion of Balthazar as a gender queer character who has a special capacity to sympathize with the female perspective in a way that the other male characters in the play lack. For contextualization and contrasting variety, we also listened to Vergil Thompson’s 1957 setting of “Sigh no more, Ladies” which was written for an operatic female persona and was sung with much vitality and cheerfulness by Elisabeth Boudreault with Patrick Hansen at the piano.

Cutting Shakespeare’s text for the libretto in such a way that the opera retains the spirit of the play and its sense of formal unity was Patrick’s main challenge as librettist. Patrick skillfully combined the two conversion scenes of the play into one, which proved a useful way of cutting down the time of the opera, and also meant that Balthazar’s song would penetrate and comment on the conversions of both Benedick and Beatrice. Before we heard the whole composite scene sung of act 2, scene 3 (where Benedick is tricked into falling “horribly in love” with Beatrice by his friends) and act 3, scene 1 (where Beatrice is tricked into loving Benedick by her cousin Hero and Margaret), the singers first read out the text of the libretto. Interestingly, even speaking the parts some of James’s rhythmically precise text setting was already audible in the singers’ expression. As Jonah Spungin, who sang the part of Benedick, pointed out later in conversation, James had done such a sensitive job of setting the natural

speech rhythms of the text, that the music had become a guide for the singers for its rhetorically affective spoken pronunciation. Here, for example, is Benedick's opening recitative in the scene:

Anna Lewton-Brain asked a question about James's compositional process, whether he began with words or with music, and he explained how he had spent a significant amount of time working with Shakespeare's text before he began to compose. He read the play over himself numerous times, watched as many productions of it as he could, and read it out loud with a professional actor colleague, even scanning passages.

The first sounding of the scene was exciting and a great success. Although the singers were still learning some of their notes, the musical shape and brilliant organization of the scene was immediately apparent. James had played with the customarily separate operatic forms of recitative and aria and intermingled them in the scene, and through and above these textures floated Balthazar's lilting air. Because several of the opera singers had worked with James before on another opera of his, mounted at McGill in 2016, they were able to speak to his compositional style with understanding. At one point later in the workshop, Jonah pointed out that, knowing James's style, he had expected a certain phrase to be set in a different part of his range, and James so liked the idea that he changed the music immediately to reflect Jonah's suggestion. Witnessing and participating in the compositional process, as Iain Fenlon would point out in his interview with James Garner during the work-shop performance on day three, is a rare occurrence and of great musicological interest.

The day ended with a presentation by Julian Philips and Stephen Plaice on their new opera, *The Tale of Januarie*. Like our *Much Ado* opera, this opera grew out of the academy: Julian and Stephen both teach in the MA in Opera Making & Writing program at the Guildhall. *The Tale of Januarie* is an adaptation in Middle English of Chaucer's "The Merchant's Tale" and thus offered some interesting textual challenges to the librettist Stephen Plaice, who had to convert a tale narrated in third person into

the dramatic language of direct dialogue while still being true to Chaucer's vocabulary, rhythms, and meter. Stephen spoke about his decision to split Chaucer's pentameter lines to form a ballad stanza rhymed ABCB. He also commented helpfully, that what the librettist must aim for is something unfinished; it must leave room for the other art forms. The composer Julian Philips talked about the importance of establishing a strong dramatic structure for the opera so that it has unity and wholeness. Ultimately, this project, like *Much Ado*, required that librettist and composer have the courage of their convictions and make something new, but also that they catch the essence of the original. Watching a few clips of the performance of their opera at the end of the day was a welcome reminder of all the further layering of meaning and decision-making that will come when *Much Ado* is mounted in a full production with set design, costumes, lighting, orchestra, etc.

Day two of the workshop was spent with singers and actors rehearsing scenes from the opera and play in alternatim. The work on 3.1 by the actors was particularly intellectually fruitful for Patsy Badir, who became fascinated with the role of Hero. Fran Regis, the actor who was playing Hero played her much more seriously and less cheerfully than she is traditionally portrayed, which raised for the scholars all sorts of questions about gender and misogyny in the play. Ultimately this discussion made its way into Patsy's scholarly interlude in the performance on day three, where she also commented on how giving the lyric soprano role to Hero rather than Beatrice (mezzo) in the opera helped to lend Hero the kind of strong and loud voice that Patsy wanted for her, and that Fran was able to bring to her role through her more serious interpretation and dramatization of the character.

During the scene work, both operatic and theatrical, on 4.1, in which Beatrice demands that Benedick "kill Claudio," Anthony Dawson spoke about the bonds of homosocial friendship that are being challenged in the play by the demands of heterosexual attachment; when Beatrice asks Benedick to kill his friend and brother in arms, she is in essence demanding that he treat her as if she were his kin. This topic became the subject for Anthony's scholarly interlude during the workshop-performance. Amanda Kellock, who in addition to directing the scene work was playing the role of Beatrice, was able to speak at length about the heroine's motivations and the struggle she must undergo within herself to master her pride and let herself form the attachment that she does to Benedick. Falling in love for both Beatrice and Benedick requires a certain amount of humiliation, but for a man with real power in the world, that social humiliation would be much less devastating to his identity than for the identity of woman in Beatrice's position.

The second day ended with a discussion about the current state of our respective fields. The opera singers talked about the conservative nature of the operatic art form and the problem of celebrity. Many leading roles that are meant to be sung by young lyric sopranos for instance, continue to be sung by older, well-established divas, making it extremely difficult to break into the performance world for young artists. The young actors expressed similar sentiments about their field, but remarked that opera was certainly a much more conservative and slow-moving artistic tradition than theatre, which tends towards the experimental end of the artistic spectrum. There is of course a similar challenge for young academics vying for a very small number of available university postings. Over 75% of PhDs in the humanities never get tenure-track teaching jobs. Paul spoke about the TRaCE (Track Report Connect Exchange) project that seeks to enhance public recognition of the value of the humanities outside the academy.

The artists and scholars separated on day-three and spent that day preparing for the public performance workshop. The performance workshop wove research insights and questions together with performances of scenes from *Much Ado* side-by-side with performances from parallel scenes from the *Much Ado* opera-in-progress. Paul acted as MC for the event, Anna's scholarly interlude spoke to the

conversional properties of musical sound, tying together the linguistic and musical focuses of the disciplines, and Valerie ended the performance by asking a series of philosophical questions inspired by the play; questions like, “what is the nature of forgiveness?”

The audience at the performance workshop not only took part in a creative experiment in music, theatre, and scholarship, they also contributed to the creation of the full new *Much Ado about Nothing* opera, which will have its world debut in 2020. One audience member, Remi Chiu, Professor of musicology at Loyola University Maryland, Baltimore, remarked that he found this type of research exciting and engaging, and that the scholarly presentations were interwoven brilliantly with the theatrical and musical performances so that the whole presentation was of a piece.

Converting Sounds was a collaboration of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, the Early Modern Conversions Project, and Opera McGill (Schulich School of Music, McGill University).

