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**Composing the Music-Theatre Work
I.th.Ak.A. within a Framework of Artistic
Research**

(Samuel Penderbayne)

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Abstract

I.th.Ak.A. is a new music-theatre production, premiered on 6 April 2018, in the *Opera stabile* of the Hamburg State Opera, supported by the Claussen-Simon Foundation and University for Music and Theatre, Hamburg. The music was developed within an Artistic research project, aiming to make intuitive creative ideas cognitive through critical reflection. Specifically, I wished to shed light on the potential to enrich an opera of contemporary classical music through elements of commercial music genres. This involved conceiving such genres as 'external' to the classical music tradition and perceives an inside/outside relationship between contemporary classical music and commercial music genres (respectively) and a possibility for 'newness' through their interaction. This article reflects on the creative compositional process of developing the score of a new opera and evaluates formative moments thereof.

Zusammenfassung

Die Uraufführung der Musiktheaterproduktion *I.th.Ak.A* fand am 6. April 2018 in der *Opera Stabile*, einer Spielstätte der Hamburger Staatsoper, statt. Unterstützt wurde die Uraufführung von der Claussen-Simon-Stiftung sowie der Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg. Die Musik wurde in einem Künstlerische-Forschung-Projekt entwickelt. Das Ziel war hierbei, intuitive kreative Ideen durch kritische Reflexion kognitiv beschreibbar zu machen. Im Speziellen war mein Wunsch, das Potential zu beleuchten, eine Oper der zeitgenössischen Klassik durch Elemente kommerzieller Musikgenres anzureichern. Dies beinhaltete die Entdeckung, dass solche Genres als „external“ zur klassischen Musiktradition bezeichnet werden müssen, was eine Innen/Außen-Beziehung zwischen zeitgenössischer Klassik und kommerziellen Musikgenres beziehungsweise einen Neuheitswert durch ihre Interaktion beschreibbar macht. Der Artikel reflektiert den kreativen Kompositionsprozess bei der Entwicklung der Partitur einer neuen Oper und evaluiert die konstitutiven Momente ihrer Entstehung.

1.1 About the Project

The chamber opera *I.th.Ak.A.* is the result of a unique collaboration between the Hamburg State Opera, University for Music and Theatre, Hamburg, and the Claussen-Simon Foundation. In 2015, these three institutions published an open call for proposals to compose an opera in combination with a substantial written text for submission as a doctoral thesis (*Dr scientiae musicae*). Combined, this program forms the *Opernstipendium*, which was readvertised in 2018. From the 60 candidates, I was chosen to compose an opera based on a new, purpose-written re-telling of the *Odyssey* by Helmut Krausser and a 120-page text on my approach to composition, which I call *cross-genre*. Since August 2015, I have received a monthly stipend from the Claussen-Simon Foundation, which supported my living expenses for three years and allowed me to focus solely on the entire project. The opera was premiered on April 6 in the *opera stabile* and I plan to submit my thesis in summer 2018 for consideration by the academic board for *Dr scientiae musicae* at the university. The *Opernstipendium* is a visionary program offering a world-class pathway for young composer-researchers.

Before Helmut Krausser agreed to write the text for *I.th.Ak.A.*, I submitted a concept that aimed to bring together Homer's *The Odyssey* with a modern digital situation: Cyclops could represent surveillance and rebellion against it, Circe could stand for limitless sexual fantasy, Odysseus' existential trip to the underground could be compared to being 'driven' into the dark net for various reasons. On a more profound level, I was intrigued by the level of wildness, danger, beauty and limitless fantasy of Homer's mystical mediterranean world, which I saw to be comparable to the modern digital realm. *I.th.Ak.A.* stands for an online community, described by the main character, Juli (from Ulysses), as a 'meeting point' for 'people like her'. On the basis of these thoughts, Krausser wrote an intelligent and effective text, placing Juli in a prison where she hacks a computer to gain access to the dark net and meets 'freak-show'-like characters that lead her ultimately to confront her own fears.

Where the opera counts as half of my thesis, a substantial written text counts as the other. In the text, I explore an idea that I have pursued intuitively over my

career thus far, which I call ‘cross-genre’: the intention to enrich a compositional approach based in the classical music tradition with elements of modern commercial genres. In the broadest possible context, I could see this encapsulating folk-classical hybridisers such as Bela Bartók and Toru Takemitsu, cross-over composers like Nils Frahm and some of Philip Glass’ oeuvre, and young contemporary composers like Bernhard Gander and Alexander Schubert, who use references to rock or techno music (respectively) at a veiled and conceptual level. For the purposes of my thesis, this is narrowed down to focus on how musical characterisation in opera can be enriched through elements of modern commercial genres. The score for *I.th.Ak.A.* will be analysed in its effectiveness to achieve this idea, presenting the combined score-text project as one of Artistic research, where researching through a cycle of free composition and critical (discursive) reflection leads to making intuitive artistic decisions cognitive.

1.2 Contemporary Classical Music and Commercial Music Genres

One of the principle points of stimulus in the musical material for *I.th.Ak.A.* is an aesthetic tension created by a perceived inside/outside relationship between contemporary classical music and commercial music genres (respectively). For my purposes, I have defined contemporary classical music to be that which is conserved, continued and filtered in state- and foundation-sponsored institutions that have a mandate to do so, and commercial music genres to be those filtered by commercial music charts (including digital charts such as those on Spotify). State-sponsored art institutions, such as the Hamburg State Opera, are tasked with preserving and continuing a cultural heritage that would become extinct if left exclusively to the forces of the free market. They represent, therefore, a protected ‘space’ (‘inside’) where this can occur. On the contrary, genres of music that prosper in the free market are not in need of taxpayer money and are excluded from this space (representing an ‘outside’).

Where musical elements of these two spheres interact, a ‘third space’ or ‘conflict zone’¹ is opened where the differences inherent in both approaches become most apparent. This space or zone is a borderline between two cultural ideologies – filtration through elite expertise or through free-market commerce – ‘where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences’.² I find the exposition and conflict of such musical differences to be highly stimulating to my work as a composer. By taking influence from a musical sphere that is largely excluded from the intended context of the commission, an artist can come closer to cultural taboo and thus find a generator for aesthetic attention. Such a process has been explored by Boris Grojs in *On the New*, where he examines the appearance of newness of ‘profane’ objects when collected by a museum. Although Grojs’ work is commentary on visual art, the comparison with classical music is clear when one recognises the parallel between ‘museum spaces’ (as collections of art objects) and state-sponsored music institutions (as producers and cultivators of repertoire). He writes that:

The production of the new is merely a shifting of the boundaries between collected items and the profane objects outside the collection [...] some objects are brought into the museum system, while others are thrown out [...] Such shifting produces again and again the effect of newness, openness, infinity, using signifiers that look different in respect to the musealized past and identical with mere things, popular cultural images circulating in the outside space.³

Aesthetic musical tension resulting from borderlines between music of safe-space institutions and the free market was the primary driver behind the development of *I.th.Ak.A.* and has been noted by critical responses to the work. Elisabeth Richter from the *Hamburger Abendblatt* commented on the premiere of *I.th.Ak.A.* with the following: “Penderbayne mixt in seiner Musik Zeitgenössisches mit Pop, Rock, Jazz oder Live-Electronic, da gibt es für jeden etwas zum ‘andocken’” [Penderbayne mixes in his music contemporary elements

¹ For a discussion of museums as ‘contact zones’ and places of ‘contentious and collaborative relations and interactions’, see: Philipp Schorch, “Contact zones, third spaces, and the act of interpretation. Museum and Society”, in *Museum and Society* vol. 11 no. 1, 2013, pp. 68–81.

² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London 1994, p. 218. Bhabha’s ideas have been highly influential to my work on *I.th.Ak.A.* and the development of the ‘cross-genre’ concept.

³ Boris Grojs, *Über das Neue: Versuch einer Kulturökonomie*, München 2007.

with pop, rock, jazz and live-electronics, there is something for everybody to ‘latch onto’];⁴ and Jens Fischer from *TAZ* wrote:

Mal wird mit mathematisch spröden Splitterklängen Neuer Musik argumentiert, mal mit Fragmenten süffiger Klassik oder Pop-, Rock- und Elektro-Fitzeln. ‘Cross-Genre’ nennt der australische Notensetzer seine sehr offene Collagetechnik. [Occasionally arguments are made with mathematically-brittle splinter sounds of New Music, occasionally with fragments of palatable pop, rock or electro. The Australian composer calls this very candid collage technique ‘Cross-Genre’].⁵

1.3 Critical Reflection as an Artistic Research Methodology

Although methodologies differ, much Artistic research can be seen to search for insights into the creative process - the ‘combination of genius and technical skills’⁶ (where I understand ‘genius’ to stand for ‘intuition’) required in order to make good art. Many methodologies aim to demonstrate ‘cognitive elements’ of the work in addition to the purely ‘expressive’,⁷ the latter of which may expressed best by the art itself.

The methodology for this project is a reflective one, where retrospective thought on the creative process forms research through critical evaluation, leading potentially to insights into such processes. Anke Haarmann refers to a “nachdenkliche Methodologie” [reflective methodology] that is eine “Lehre von den Wegen des künstlerischen Wissens, die nicht vorschreibt, sondern nachvollzieht” [a lesson in pathways of artistic knowledge, that doesn’t prescribe, but reenacts].⁸ This appeals to me because it allows for substantial freedom and creativity in the artistic process. An alternative would be a ‘prescriptive’ methodology, where detailed prescriptions of the technical approach are stated at the outset and followed through with rigour. Although such experiments may

⁴ Elisabeth Richter, “Eine Oper wie eine Odyssee durch das Darknet”, in *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 09.04.2018, translated by the author; <https://www.abendblatt.de/hamburg/article213960163/Eine-Oper-als-Odyssee-durch-das-Darknet.html> (accessed 4 July 2018).

⁵ Jens Fischer, “Irrfahrt durchs Internet”, in *TAZ*, 14.04.2018, translated by the author; <http://www.taz.de/!5495782/> (accessed 4 July 2018).

⁶ Dieter Lesage “Who’s Afraid of Artistic Research? On measuring artistic research output”, in *Art and Research* vol. 2, 2009.

⁷ Christopher Frayling, “Research in Art and Design”, in *Royal College of Art Research Papers*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1993.

⁸ Anke Haarmann, “Methodologie”, in *Künstlerische Forschung: Ein Handbuch*, ed. by Jens Badura et al., translated by the author, Zürich and Berlin 2015, pp. 8–88.

benefit from a clarity of purpose and intention, for me, it impedes my work flow: I need to discover details of the process through doing. Such a methodology makes intuitive artistic knowledge a focal point of research and the results of making this intuitive knowledge cognitive are the research products (Erkenntnisgewinne). It is an open, quasi-grounded theory approach that allows the art to “generate the criteria”, since “academic researchers often develop the appropriate research methods and techniques as they go [... and the] rules for the validity and reliability of the research results [...] are defined within the research domain itself”.⁹

Before composing the score, I had an idea as to what direction my creative research (intuitive composition) would take but could not describe this in enough technical detail as to formulate a prescriptive methodology. I knew that it dealt with what I now see as: cross-genre composition – the enrichment of the classical music tradition through elements of modern commercial genres. At the time, I merely had what Baz Kershaw describes as a “hunch”, an intuitive feeling that “problematizes the well-worn modernist oppositions between mind and body, spirituality and materiality, creativity and rationality, arts and sciences, and so on”.¹⁰ This hunch was followed by free listening, free reading, some light score analysis and lengthy regular discussions with my supervisor for composition Prof. Fredrik Schwenk on both the intellectual ideas and the compositional sketches – these are the elements that made the ‘hunch’ into a concretely-formulated statement of the cross-genre approach, as artistically articulated in *I.th.Ak.A.*.

As such, the methodology went through a non-linear cycle of the following stages: subaqueous formation of a hunch; free listening and reading; light score analysis; experimentation with intellectual and compositional ideas; lengthy discussion with experts; individual reflection; decision making as to concrete expressions of intellectual and compositional ideas. Critical reflection on this process generates

⁹ Hank Borgdorff, “The Debate on Research in the Arts”, in: *Focus on Artistic Research and Development*, no. 2. Bergen 2007.

¹⁰ Baz Kershaw, “Practice as Research Through Performance”, in *Practice-led research, research-led practice in the creative arts*, ed. By Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean, Edinburgh 2015, p. 115.

the discursive component of the combined artistic-discursive Artistic research project.

2.1 Developing the Score – Record of Key Stages of the Working Progress in Retrospective Reflection

The core element of the reflections on the project is the creation of a record of key stages of the working process, created in hindsight. Specifically, this includes exchanges with: the librettist, Helmut Krausser, doctoral supervisor for composition, Prof. Fredrik Schwenk, and the creative production team for the opera, as well as memories of turning-points in the production phase as relating to the score. Of particular weight to this record are moments where the characterisation of musical characters through elements of modern commercial genres was noticeably enriched. Such moments can lead to insights regarding researching cross-genre composition as an approach fruitful to operatic composition.

2.1.1 Broad aesthetic imagination – March to April 2015

The first actions taken toward developing the score were broad aesthetic imaginations as to what sort of musical score I would like to produce at that period of my artistic life, stimulated by the application to the *Opernstipendium*, which required such a statement of intent. Of utmost importance to me was that I reflect my musical reality as a consumer (a music-experiencer) in my work as a composer. This reality features experiencing sharply contradicting music in quick succession: I consume music by going to *YouTube* or *Spotify* and hearing extremely different sorts of music, for example, a Bulgarian Womens' Choir, Daft Punk, J. S. Bach and Toshio Hosokawa in succession. Although I did not intend to quote these styles and create a collage that depicts my consumerist habits, I imagined an aesthetic that would allow at least for the effect of sharply contrasting styles. With this goal in mind, I sketched dramaturgical ideas that could support this idea of multiplicity, extremity and the feeling of being overwhelmed. Of these sketches, a focus on the internet was a logical pathway for re-creating my consumerist experience. I also remembered that around a year

before this, I had sketched a concert programme with a colleague based on books from *The Odyssey*, where we were inspired by matching diverse repertoire with contrasting ‘stations’ of the journey. I then combined these two elements and found it easy to create a concept for what later became *I.th.Ak.A.*, which I called *Home(-r)* at the time, to emphasise the role of returning to home – equivalent to me to returning to reality after an online expedition. I asked Helmut Krausser if he would write a letter of intent to write the libretto, should I be selected, and he agreed. This package was then submitted as my application, as well as a musical sketch, which featured a series of parallel fifths in groove-like patterns, foreshadowing ‘cross-genre’. By way of reflection, these aesthetic imaginations paved the way for such contrasts to be character-related and thereby semiotic.

2.1.2 Discussions and Development with the Librettist – June to October 2015

The first input of mine to Krausser regarding the libretto was sending him the concept for *Home(-r)*, which discussed thematic and musical possibilities for six elements of the *Odyssey*: the Cyclops, Circe, Demodocus’ war songs, Odysseus’ journey to the underworld, the Sirens and the slaying of the suitors. I also informed him as to the maximum ensemble: five instruments and four singers. He was at first reluctant to set *The Odyssey* without a larger cast, and I proposed using electronics as a way to create an epic sound-world. A key challenge for him was the contrast between the large distances of *The Odyssey* and the physical stasis of using a computer.¹¹ In this early stage he first mentioned the idea of setting the story in a ‘madhouse’, where the protagonist finds access to a computer – here, the reality of the journey could be called into question and disbelief could be more easily suspended.¹² What’s more, Krausser felt that this would lend itself better to an intimate cast and chamber opera scenario, citing Michael Nyman’s *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* as a model.¹³

¹¹ Email correspondence between Krausser and me, 28 June 2015.

¹² Email correspondence between Krausser and me, 5 July 2015.

¹³ Email correspondence between Krausser and me, 1 July 2015.

He stated his intention to create an oppressive system that works against the freedom of the protagonist, who he had since cross-gendered from the original male Odysseus to the female Juli by way of 'Ulysses'. The end should be 'kafkaesque' and 'dystopian' – Juli should desire to reach the 'free zone' in the internet but online arrives at a place which is a 'cheap illusion'.¹⁴ Aside from these developments, I asked if I was correct in perceiving strong ironic and satiric moments, to which he responded that there may be 'slight surrealistic moments like in a Fellini Film'.¹⁵ As a working term, I asked if I could see the work as a 'thriller' or 'psychological drama' and he concurred that this would be appropriate.¹⁶ As such, I started improvising musically (at the piano) with these themes and genres in mind, in an attempt to find some beginnings of a language.

I made a request for him to include more song-like passages in addition to the dialog-driven scenes that he had sketched. For this, Krausser had the idea that Juli could sing to combat her fear, and wrote a few lyrical passages of text for this purpose.¹⁷ He then delivered a sketch of the entire libretto and commented that the music must play the 'biggest role'.¹⁸ On the basis of this constructive feedback loop, I requested the Sirens be featured, who were not yet in the text. The reasons for this that I gave were: their popularity and fame as characters, difference to the others in the story and a concrete idea to use 'live looping' as a way to make many (Siren) voices out of one live voice.¹⁹ Looping is prevalent in pop music yet rare in contemporary classical composition, a situation that interested me.

On 20 August 2015, Krausser delivered another first full draft and on the next day, I gathered my thoughts into a concept which paired each part of each scene to a few lines about what sort of music I was imagining, based on my improvisations and thoughts. I included some references to modern commercial genres such as Soul and R&B, riffing (i.e. from Rock and Heavy Metal) and Techno. Regarding this, he voiced a concern that these styles would mask my

¹⁴ Email correspondence between Krausser and me, 14 July 2015.

¹⁵ Email correspondence between Krausser and me, 19 July 2015.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Email correspondence between Krausser and me, 22 July 2015.

¹⁸ Email correspondence between Krausser and me, 3 August 2015.

¹⁹ Email correspondence between Krausser and me, 4 August 2015.

personal voice to which I replied that I was not aiming for a pastiche, rather a hybrid or cross-fertilisation of them with my own contemporary classical language.²⁰ After this exchange, Krausser made slight changes and delivered the final libretto on 6 October 2015.

In hindsight, the dialog between Krausser and myself focussed mainly on fitting my aesthetic desires for a range of colourful episodes into a narrative which maintains dramatic tension. The surreal ‘madhouse’ setting solved his needs for a ‘Kammerspiel’-like scenario and mine for a highly fantastical world. It was a process of mutual influence: I provided the general concept, he found a largely dark (‘kafkaesque’) aesthetic which I could use as a basis and responded to requests for lyrical passages that could be composed as songs, which he included where he saw fit. The range of characters (as received from my concept as well as of his own creation) fit with my aesthetic goals to create a musical kaleidoscope that can distract from the potential smallness of the room – a challenge he made me aware of. His warning that combining external styles may distract from the personal style forced me to think about how influences on my work enrich my musical expression rather than mask them.

2.1.3 Discussions with the Doctoral Supervisor for Composition, Prof. Fredrik Schwenk – November 2015 to April 2017

Dialog with Prof. Fredrik Schwenk occurred verbally and as such, no documentary trail exists. The developments here are recreated by memory.

The first point of discussion was the text, which we read through and discussed, section by section, in order to comprehend it. I suggested potential musical lengths for each section, using the rule-of-thumb that sung text takes four times longer than spoken text, and adding any ideas for which lines would require especially deep treatment, which can be quickly performed in recitativo and where some instrumental passages would be effective. From these thoughts, we decided to aim for around 90 minutes of music.

²⁰ Email correspondence between Krausser and me, 23 August 2015.

Before getting into individual scenes, potential dramatic arcs for the work in its entirety were taken into consideration. On one hand, some elements run throughout: the oppression of Juli by the ‘madhouse’ and also by herself, the desire to reach *I.th.Ak.A.*, the tragic stubbornness of her character and the hopelessness of her situation. I decided to represent the first two elements through Leitmotifs – an asymmetric rhythm representing her oppression and a set of three intervals representing *I.th.Ak.A.*. The latter two elements were built into the pitch-class harmony surrounding Juli’s figure, built on minor-2, fourth, tritone and major-7 intervals. These intervals represent her struggle. Occasionally, minor chords with 7ths and 9ths – mostly in A minor and D minor – represent windows into Juli’s previous life before the ‘madhouse’, which is always ‘destroyed’ by a reversion to the dissonant language. Her mode of singing was either aggressive and angular or introverted and delicate. This was the first character development in the work and was intended to be a glue or a basis for the work. It attempts to create a musical narrative through concrete relations between music and text. Since the main intervals form a viscerally dissonant harmony, we associated Juli with an ‘eternal avantgardist’ who fights against the harmony of her past. She came to represent a form of contemporary classical musical language, at least in the ‘Nachkriegszeit’, where such harmonic rebellion was prevalent. She would, as such, represent the ‘inside’ – ‘inside’, in the sense, that her (inner-)psyche and her journey is the conveyer for the whole Odyssey, and also ‘inside’ in the sense that this post-tonal language represents the contemporary classical music tradition for the purposes of the structural musical language in *I.th.Ak.A.*. This paved the way for the other characters to contrast this language as ‘external’ forces. This presented itself as the most important arc of musical suspense: the clear aesthetic musical difference of the characters and their interactions with Juli. Our intention was that the musical fantasy surrounding the characters would provide a sort of ‘circus show’ of difference that would create a disorientation such as that which Juli feels, leading to empathy with her desire to reach *I.th.Ak.A.* (a place where she is safe and somehow at home). The audience should feel a sort of saturation at the end of the work; a maximum capacity for stylistic difference, preparing the purity of the a cappella

solo ending. Tension is created through her stubborn perseverance with her language and the challenges from the other characters.

The key task was to create structure despite the many stylistic directions taken with the characterisations. Through producing sketches and discussing them, a pattern emerged of how Juli could interact with the characters: the ‘new style’ of the character could be introduced (since each character should have a style recognisably different to that which came before), a cross-genre-style third space would be constructed between Juli and the other character, and in the latter parts of the scene, the differences would be insurmountable to the extent that they become exaggerated in order to build tension for the appearance of a new character, who would function as a stylistic ‘relief’. We assumed one could continue like this for slightly more than an hour if the differences were pronounced and the interaction with Juli and acceleration of materials done well. For the very end, a change in Juli’s language (and dramatic state) could constitute a closing statement for the work – she could start to take on elements of the other characters and integrate into her environment. Indeed, perhaps the environment integrates into her. For the final scene, I decided to write an a-cappella-aria, demonstrating her ‘alone-ness’ in the world and that *I.th.Ak.A.* is within.

2.1.4 Discussions with the Creative Production Team – July 2016 to April 2018

After discussions with the director (Paul-Georg Dittrich) and dramaturg (Johannes Blum), we decided to cut the original Krausser ending. The plot focusses on a digitally-themed psychological journey to *I.th.Ak.A.*, as experienced by Juli in the internet. A ‘boat trip’ in a late scene is supposed to lead to *I.th.Ak.A.* – which is described as an island – but instead leads only to a sandbank, upon which Juli starts to ‘drown’. Here, in the original version as delivered by Krausser, a doctor from the ‘madhouse’ offers her salvation, should she only cooperate with him. Juli refuses and drowns. The doctor then explains to the audience that the journey was an induced hallucination (a ‘trip’, in psychedelic terms) to test her amicability for society, which she has just failed, having never cooperated with

the any of previous characters, all of which could have helped her. It is this final explanation scene in the cell that we cut – instead ending with her ‘drowning’ on the ‘sandbank’ and leaving the precise meaning of this open.

Krausser’s original ending had a glimpse of hope that she would one day succeed in his personality test. The doctor is then mastermind of the action. Ending the opera at the previous scene, however, where Juli decides to drown, puts her in control of her destiny and creates a narrative that the journey was always about herself and her own fears. These thoughts radically changed the piece. Above all, the ‘drowning’ at the end (or what this represents – loss of self, loss of mentality etc.) represents a freedom for Juli, including a freedom of choice. This led to an increased importance of the motif of freedom in the opera, and I re-composed sections that used the word ‘freedom’ as such. Before this, I had focussed more on the role of the ‘madhouse’ in oppressing Juli’s freedom (through the interaction of the ‘oppression rhythm’ with her language) than in how Juli creates freedom for herself within her interactions with the other characters. The end result is that in many scenes she finds a moment to ‘freeze’ the forwards-traction that the other characters create and ruminate on her wish to be free. Musically, the language of the external character is stopped and Juli creates for herself a moment of reflection, before the character ‘unfreezes’ – here, I use language built on the A natural-minor and D natural-minor scales, with occasional sharp dissonances around A, B-flat, B-natural and C, that provide a connection to her other language, as described in 2.1.3. (which represents her struggle). The ability to musically ‘freeze’ the characters is a musical demonstration that she is in control of the (inner) journey, even if she believes she is not.

Another key meeting was one of the first with the entire creative team in Berlin on 20 March 2017. Here, the relationship between Juli and the other characters was of main focus, resulting in the decision that the characters represent versions of her: perhaps they are figures from her past or aspects of her personality that she never had the opportunity to live out. This led to the creation of a vocal quartet where all four vocalists sing in homophony representing the intimate relations between their characters. Another terminology introduced was that of a ‘costume

'freak-show' which made me think further about the delineation of characters in the work. On a minor note, we discussed the expectations that using an antique Greek text can bring. For this reason, we changed the title from *Ithaka* to *I.th.Ak.A.* to indicate towards a modernisation of the material. It does not stand for anything in particular, but has the form of an acronym as used by political organisations.

By way of reflection, I believe that the exchange with the team, director and dramaturg brought a new level of meaning into the work, especially by choosing to cut the ending, considering 'freedom' as a key theme, and seeing the characters as versions of Juli. These had considerable effects on the score: putting Juli's material at the forefront instead of attempting to build an external, oppressive musical system; building in moments of musical freedom as controlled by Juli; culminating the work in a quartet. Juli's musical interactions with the other characters as well as the moments of freedom she takes for herself become the mechanics of the journey, rather than part of the mechanics a journey controlled by the system.

2.1.5 Finishing the Score: Characterisation as Compositional Focus – January to July 2017

At the time of these discussions, I had already made sketches for the languages of each character and built structural skeletons for the scenes. The understanding of Juli's role as the game-master and the other characters as 'freak-show versions' of her led me to treat these sketches differently, building in a complexity into the development of Juli's language, creating soloistic, reflective moments of 'freedom' in her passages. Her language was described in 2.1.3. Crucially, I found creative drive in pushing the characters further into caricature, aided by associating the characters with commercial music genres, a drive which helped finish the score.

Cyclops' character music (a scene which I re-wrote seven times) is focussed on pentatonic scales in C-major, either through floral arpeggios in the piano or

mechanic staccato basslines, supported by the e-drum kit playing standard computer reconstructions of drum kit sounds. The tenor switches between a somewhat mechanic construction of perfect 4ths, with one syllable per note, and Bel Canto-style melismatic ‘cadenzas’ on the pentatonic scale. The only additional element to his language are ‘error’ and ‘warning’ sounds that are composed instrumentally from clusters and vocally from low staccato-marcato notes. These materials were garnered from 8-bit or ‘Chiptune’ music, for example, early Gameboy music for games such as *The Legend of Zelda*. There are no direct quotes or transpositions of materials from this genre. The music drew instead on my significant experience with the genre. Such games generally use very basic musical materials: simple alternating kick and snare patterns, pentatonic scales and highly illustrative depictions of the game-narrative. These elements were what I sought for Cyclops – he should be more 1990s MS-DOS than 21st-century OSX. As such, hermeneutic information as to Cyclops’ nature, that of a simple computer programme, is encoded in the musical material.

This character nature is contrasted with Juli – her dissonant and harmonically complex language, built from dissonant intervals and 12-tone rows (that nevertheless mark out inverted minor triads, harking subtly to her ‘pre-madhouse’ state) interrupts Cyclops’ phrases with aggressive rejections of his messages and shows a ‘human’ side that cannot be reduced to a few simple materials. It shows Juli’s impatient nature and inability to work with a (frustrating) system – in this case, a computer system. Where for Cyclops, the accompaniment is focussed almost entirely on piano and e-drums, Juli’s accompaniment is built from strings and e-guitar, who play either aggressive staccato chords or fragile long single notes, when she is unsure of how to progress. Previously, I had tried to bring the two into a more fluid dialog, showing Cyclops’ desires in a similar light to Juli’s. However, the discovery of him as a caricature leads to a clearly confrontational dialog, and discussions that Cyclops was a ‘projection’ of Juli’s past (or a part of her personality) led me to imagine that she was reliving a rebellion against an authorial but somewhat pathetic patriarchal figure.

Circe's music draws on Soul and R&B rhythms, sounds and melodies, and more contemporary manifestations of these genres in individual Hip Hop and Pop artists. Unlike with Cyclops and his 'Chiptune' music, which I reconstructed by memory, for Soul and R&B, I downloaded a large amount of tracks (c. 50) from these genres that explicitly dealt with sex, sexuality and sexiness: from Donna Sommer, James Brown, Beyoncé, Timbaland and Ariana Grande amongst others. I heard these songs on loop and read the text intermediately, trying to find common elements between the tracks and see if they had an application in Krausser's 'song' for Circe. Common amongst many tracks was the doubling of a key part of the groove with a simple minor second interval. For whatever reason, using this interval rhythmically in the core of a groove was a common feature that I intuitively felt expressed the lure of sexuality. As such, the bassline for Circe's song – and recitativo material drawing upon it – consists of a simple rhythmic cell with a minor second, which is, nevertheless, transposed freely throughout the work to give a harmonic structure. Furthermore, this interval functioned harmonically as the dominant and flattened submediant (b6) – a sort of predominant and dominant function in the bass that always 'promised' resolution to the tonic but largely delayed the arrival thereof. Vocally, she sings on a quasi-octatonic scale with a strong melodic exaggeration on minor and augmented seconds through placement of this interval in the phrase and on key parts of the text (for example for the term 'Erträumen' – 'dream up'). Although the tracks that I downloaded as examples tended to stick closely to the natural minor scale, I sought in the octatonic scale an exotic flavour that was in line with the highly sexually objectified role that she plays, that of a deliberately alluring and certainly dangerous caricature of sexual desire. Finally, before her song is sung, I produced a 70-second 'pop up' electronic track that was played through the PA-system. It sampled a large amount of Soul and R&B vocal lines (from the Logic Pro 9's *Jam Pack*), giving the effect that dozens of women sing hooklines such as 'baby, baby', 'ooo' 'yeah, yeah, yeah', 'come with me' etc. in a sexually connotative style.

Juli's interaction with Circe begins as with Cyclops – she uses the confrontational dissonances and sings with non-metric rhythm to directly contrast the most accessible style from Circe, displaying a musical equivalent to the dramaturgy of

the first part of the scene, where Circe tries to seduce Juli and Juli rejects this. After a few attempts at seduction, Circe suddenly and dramatically changes her language from seducer to disgruntled reject and sings with intervals similar to Juli's. At this point, the musical similarity reinforces the familiarity built up between the characters when they talk of Juli's situation and how to help her overcome it. When the solution is presented – that Juli becomes a sex-worker to attract a customer with anonymity – Juli takes on Circe's 'seductive' language from the beginning, she being an internet sex worker now, herself. As such, the different musical languages and their hermeneutic associations serve to strengthen the character difference and development, as given by the text.

Dark is a personification of the 'dark net', into which Juli travels after the scene with Circe. It was important that the dark net had a sense of mysticism, for which I drew on the primitivistic (neo-monarchic) music of Carl Orff – the e-drums play samples of timpani (with much reverb), tiger gongs, bells and some sounds from horror films, such as ratchets and chimes. Adding to the influence from the horror genre are dissonant harmonic trills in the cello and scraped piano strings. Adding to the mystic music were repetitive poly-tonal piano chords played in the extreme registers of the piano and the vocal delivery of the Bass, who should sing 'monk-like' in the lowest register of his voice with slight amplification, delay and reverb on his voice, to make it seem more 'godlike'. His phrases were structured similar to Gregorian chant, with phrases limited to two or three notes in stepwise succession following the obvious contours of the text. When Dark made special emphasis on syllables, the voice jumps up over an octave for an unpredictably large change in dynamic, tone colour and expression – this was intended to create a sense of danger in the character, who then oscillates between these two modi. Together, these elements should create a mix of mysticism and horror that express the key qualities of the dark net, as I see them. In the middle of his scene, he sings a song about how he is a warrior in the dark net, fighting against the same people as Juli, and that they should therefore join sides. For this, I drew on music of contemporary war in Afghanistan: Islamic fighters, who are otherwise forbidden to listen to music, use a specific prayer called a *Nasheed* to replace the obvious role music can play in war, and American soldiers are famed for listening

to heavy metal music before and during combat.²¹ The ‘Warrior Aria’ generally uses ‘power chords’ retrieved from heavy metal (octaves with a 5th but no 3rd, that are transposed in parallel, usually in unison with the bassline) and doubled between the cello and e-guitar, three heavy metal e-drum samples (a kick, snare and tom), a mechanical and relentless 1-bar pattern in the lower register of the piano in straight 8th notes (with one triplet on the final beat), and a vocal melody build on arpeggios starting from the low register and ascending aggressively to the upper, powerful register. This is intermediately interrupted by *Nasheed*-like Arabic scales. At the end of the aria, electronic samples of swords and hooves (a theme common to *Nasheeds* referring to Mohammad’s time in exile in the desert), burning, bombs and a veiled but clear sample of a *Nasheed* from a Jihadist propaganda video – on top of these samples, the violin plays versions of Arabic scales in free-time (without rhythm or metre) that differ from the originals in that I modulate the mode freely mid-phrase, something not done in the original form. As such, a synthesis of war songs from both sides of the conflict in Afghanistan should present a multi-faceted and culturally rich depiction of Dark’s ideology of war.

The way Juli responds to Dark is different to how she responds to Cyclops and Circe – she is intrigued, almost polite. Although she also ultimately ‘rejects’ his advances of friendship, companionship and collegiality through war, and does so with the same *marcato* 12-tone chords and melodic lines as before, there is an aspect of hope that Juli will find true collegiality with Dark, since she has a noticeably calmer and more amicable attitude towards him.

Borgo is the most perverse character in the work, almost entirely using exaggerated forms of vocal ‘extended technique’ as common in avantgarde and contemporary classical music: consonants are stammered, vowels are distorted through choking or gargling sounds, and ‘Sprechstimme’-style pitches are placed in hysterically loud and high or strangely low registers. He sings of how he is an

²¹ Thomas E. Ricks, *The Best Defense list of the top 10 songs for heading into combat*, 12 November 2010; <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/11/12/the-best-defense-list-of-the-top-10-songs-for-heading-into-combat/> (accessed 20 June 2018).

artist, drawing inspiration from terror attacks on tourist hotels and mass murders in general. In reality, he is a perverse, digital hermit. Therefore, the musical language can be seen as a critique of contemporary classical vocal music that takes 'extended technique' to such an extreme as to make the musical experience exclusive to those who are specialists in contemporary classical music themselves – just as Borgo is at an extreme periphery with his perversity and concept of 'art', so are composers who spend their careers writing music exclusively with extended techniques. This critique culminates in a complete turn-around in the vocal writing: for the final 'Warning and Adieu' passage of Borgo's music, he sings in an almost pure Bel Canto style, ending with an 'Adieu' phrase that was directly influenced (although not exactly copied) from the 'Addio, addio' duet in Act 1 of Verdi's *Rigoletto*.

Although the passages involving Borgo's 'extended techniques' draw responses from Juli in her standard style, the 'turn-around' passage at the end makes Juli, for the first time, sing in the same language as the other character at the same time (in the Circe scene, Juli and Circe 'swapped' languages, but didn't sing the same way at the same time). This should demonstrate that Juli is starting to integrate herself in her environment, just as it gets its most perverse (in fact, Krausser's text makes explicit usage of the word 'perverse' to describe Borgo) and strange.

The **Kapitän** is a ship captain or ferryman that claims to know the way to I.th.Ak.A. and offers this to Juli. Ultimately, he is just a smuggler, and dumps her on a sandbank near the Sirens instead of the promised goal. Kapitän is essential Charon, delivering Juli to the afterlife. Key to my conception of the character was to imagine him as terminally sick and close to death. The main term I worked with was 'broken' – which happens to be an album by Heavy Metal band *Nine Inch Nails*, where they take songs of previous albums and brake the structure of the songs and the sounds themselves through distortion and other effects that destroy the original quality of sound. Kapitän sings with an extremely present and strong electronic effect on his voice, the like of which had not come before in the piece, which pitch his voice an octave down and add digital glitch-like delays. In

terms of pitch, the melodic material of his vocal lines are built from the 'I.th.Ak.A. Leitmotif' - a sequence of a descending major 7th and a rising perfect 5th interval. To me, this has a 'broken' quality, in that the power-chord quality is broken through the 7th, which should be an 8ve, were it to be 'fixed'. When not singing melodic material, he 'groans' and 'moans' in the lowest register of his voice, and in these moments, the amplification is increased and the 'wet' signal of the effect, too. Groaning and moaning are clear forms of sickness. The strings ensemble play slow glissandi and different forms of wide vibrato, creating an uneasy effect like sea-sickness, where one does not know the pitch and the intended tonality or atonality, just movement between pitch destinations. The e-drums play 'grunge' samples, like from Joy Division, with booming kick drums and snare hits with extreme reverb, as if in a cathedral. The guitar and piano play polytonal 'broken' chords (i.e. 'rippled' chords) such as those for 'Dark' with much delay, creating dissonant waves and walls of sound. After a significant scene between the two, culminating in a dynamic and rhythmic climax, the Kapitän sings a song about his 'ship without a rudder or motors', accompanied by the cello and e-guitar with simple 5ths – this song should show a fragile inner core to his character, partly explaining the bravado and effect-laden music of the first part. Many Grunge and Metal bands build reflective ballads into their sets, such as *Black Sabbath's* 'Planet Caravan', *Metallica's* 'Nothing Else Matters' (at least parts of the song), or – the main influence – 'Hurt' by *Nine Inch Nails*.

Juli is intoxicated by the Kapitän and completely abandons the marcato 12-tone chords and moments of aggressive and pointed dissonance that defined her attitude for much of the work up to this point. She uses many elements of her 'pre-madhouse' music and sings together with the Kapitän, instead of in an alternating manner, as was the case with the other characters (apart from the final passage in Borgo's scene). The Kapitän scene ends with a Quartet without text, of all characters singing homophonic chords built on Juli's 'pre-madhouse' music, held for a slow 1/4 note and echoing with an electronic delay and reverb. As previously mentioned, the Quartet stands for the unification of Juli with the characters and her environment – she created it all in her head. These chords

were somewhat inspired by the church music of Hubert Howells that he wrote for St Paul's Cathedral, which has a large acoustic.

The **Sirens** are the final 'external' character in the work, before it ends with a solo a-cappella-passage – the true 'internal' area of the journey. The Sirens sing with the most simple and accessible musical languages yet. In the first half of the scene, a looping phrase in a mode similar to B minor (a mode of limited transposition I devised for the character) is 'stacked' four times: there are four phrases which are sung once by the Mezzo and then repeated by the computer, superimposed upon one another. This creates an effect of many voices arising from one, and is a popular technique in electronic music – the term 'looping' is standard in the genre. In the second part of the song, the Sirens sing a simple, largely step-wise melody to a repeating pattern of C-major, A-minor and E-minor – the most simple and puristic musical material of the work, which for me, represents the essence of Pop music on a chordal level. In Pop music, one talks of 'three-chord' or 'four-chord' songs,²² and this was the basis of the second part of the scene with the Sirens. Thematically, the Sirens seek to offer a simple, painless solution to her eternal problem of not fitting in and not being happy – death. After all of the different 'external' commercial music languages (see 1.2), from Chiptune to R&B and Heavy Metal, the styles of Primitivism and 'extended technique' music, and the constant barrage of Juli's own contemporary classical language (the 'inside', which is enriched by these other styles – see 1.2), the simple 'pure Pop'²³ is designed to offer her a beautiful, soothing pathway out of the chaos.

2.2 Summary

Composing *I.th.Ak.A.* was an experiment with the cross-genre approach that led to a range of musical possibilities for the characters involved, ones that often

²² Greg Styles, *Did Ed Sheeran steal an Australian comedy group's joke? Singer emulates The Axis of Awesome's viral 4 Chords joke during appearance on Dutch TV, 20 March 2017*; <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-4330210/Ed-Sheeran-steal-Axis-Awesome-Four-Chords-joke-Dutch-TV.html> (accessed 4 July 2018).

²³ 'Pure Pop' is a term in the industry for the most aesthetically simple and generally-accessible forms of Pop.

imported hermeneutic information from the original genres, as described above. Above all, the approach was fruitful for me due to my personal interest in the relationship between the historic classical tradition, styles of contemporary classical music and genres of music that are ‘outside’ of these musical spaces: encoding characters with these traditions and styles allowed me to make sense of the real musical world through the fictional one of the opera. I benefitted from a professional creative team who approached the work largely not in regards to cross-genre, focussing instead on dramaturgy, thematic material and compositional technique. The process of developing and finalising the score has been one of Artistic research in the sense that the artistic work was aided and influenced by a compositional goal – that of enriching an opera of contemporary classical music through elements of commercial music genres – and periodic critical reflection.