

For her: An exploration of a piano recital to raise awareness of social issues

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Abstract: Building on the tradition of music being used as a political tool, *for her* is an interdisciplinary proposal using a piano recital as a tool to raise awareness about trafficking and sexual exploitation of children. The work presents three structural elements: piano performance, testimonies, and dolls scattered among the audience. In order to open additional channels of perception, the “defamiliarization” technique was explored through the visual element of placed dolls. Results from experimental performances raised questions about the unity of the work, strategies to enhance engagement and the performer figure. This work intends to encourage an investigation of the sensorial impact of the blending of varied elements within the performance space, whilst simultaneously inviting a social reflection through an artistic experience.

Keywords: music; piano performance; interdisciplinary arts; social aspects of music; music and politics

Recital: A concert given by one performer or a small group (Griffiths, n.d.).

Human Trafficking: a new word for modern day slavery and is the name given to people who are bought and sold into exploitation. Trafficking is the 3rd largest crime in the world under Drugs and Guns (Fearless, 2015).

The word “recital” as generally referring to solo concerts has been in use since the mid-19th Century, which became established especially concerning the piano recital. Across the history, aims and specialties of the recital have been evolving - from the main platform to show one’s social connections and the aim to attract students, to a window for one’s virtuosity judgement and the aim to build a performer’s career path; from the establishment of a canon of classical works to be featured in the programme, to programmes centred around a single composer or a particular period or style (Weber, n.d.).

In the aim to explore some potential proposals for the piano recital, the work titled *for her* was developed as an investigation of the piano recital as a tool to raise awareness about a social issue - human trafficking and sexual exploitation of girls and young women. This work was built on the tradition of music being used as a political tool, as will be discussed in detail in the section dedicated to the contextualisation of this study.

I first learned about this whilst watching a documentary designed to prevent sexual exploitation during the international sports event FIFA World Cup, which happened in Brazil in the year 2014. The data involving numbers and facts about the exploitation of children had a huge impact on me. I started to consider my response with the tools that I had available: classical piano performance.

If, on this particular occasion, this work has emerged from a personal response about a social issue, we can also observe that music has been already used for political purposes in different times and contexts. Mattern cites the singer and pop musician Sting’s environmental statements and large fund-and-consciousness-raising concerts as examples of engagement of a musical activity in a social theme (Mattern, 1998, p. 5). Mattern defines these engagements under the

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“acting in concert” concept, “which is a metaphor for community-based political action through music” (Mattern, 1998, p. 4). These “acting in concert” can occur in either a *confrontational*, a *deliberative* or a *pragmatic* form (Mattern, 1998, pp. 25-32). Although Mattern develops those concepts in a study about popular music, we can possibly identify characteristics of a *pragmatic* form of acting in music in my project *for her*, considering that “a *pragmatic* form of acting in music occurs when members of one or more communities use music to promote awareness of shared interests and to organise collaborative efforts to address them” (Mattern, 1998, p. 30).

Contextualization - art and social concerns

Through an examination of the literature about the role of art regarding social and political issues since the nineteenth century, we can observe there have been opposing views about the engagement of music with such themes since that period. Garratt begins his study about music and socio-political thoughts in Wagner’s age by pointing an apparent contradiction between Wagner’s attention to social subjects and the common argument of his age supporting art’s detachment from those concerns (Garratt, 2010, p. 1). In fact, a large trend within the Romantic ideals was the one towards an intentional rejection of society (Garratt, 2010, p. 24). The deeper ingraining of Romanticism in the musical thought contributed to advocate the separatism between music and social questions, stating “[music] has nothing in common with that animating our civil and political discourse” (Gaillard cited in Garratt, 2010, p. 52).

However, still in this same scenario, some arguments towards the opposite thought were taking place. Garratt cites German Philosopher Herder’s position, which directly asserts the role of art to “purify our highest qualities (...) and [to] incline us towards that (...) which is noblest and most excellent” (Herder cited in Garratt, 2010, p. 14). Schiller is mentioned in addition to this discourse in favour of an active function of arts in the social renewal, however as a midway position commentator which aimed for a “balance [between] artistic and socio-political concerns” (Garratt, 2010, p. 15).

Reflecting on the contemporary scenario of socio-political engagement of classical music, Richard Barrett can be mentioned as an example of a composer with a pursuit to explore “how the music reflects or responds to its social conditions” (Barrett, 2009). Barrett argues for a clearer political engagement of artists and composers, urging them to “be more explicit in relating music to everything else that is going on in the world” (Barrett, 2005). In his orchestral composition entitled *NO*, for example, through compositional techniques and the featuring of novel instruments, Barrett attempted to develop a piece that challenged the audience in their listening experience, thus proposing “repercussions for the way we think of music and how we think of politics” (Service, 2005).

Specifically examining the context of the piano recital, Polish pianist Krystian Zimerman can be cited as an example of a contemporary artist who has been making use of the moment of his concerts to share a socio-political comment. Zimerman has stated his political views verbally during his piano recitals in different occasions, including his speech against United States’ plans of installing a military base in Poland in 2009⁸. Zimerman explained his urgency to reinforce

⁸ “Before playing the final work on his recital, (...) Zimerman sat silently at the piano for a moment, almost began to play, but then turned to the audience. (...) ‘Get your hands off of my country,’ he said”. (Swed, 2009)

verbally his political views for feeling that “his music making can only speak to listeners who understand where he is coming from” (Service, 2009).

If on one hand Zimerman's speeches can be seen as verbal interventions in the music programme, pianist Tomoko Mukaiyama proposed a distinct approach while bringing a theme from daily life into the piano recital in her work *Nocturne*. Mukaiyama developed this multimedia project as a commemoration of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011 (Mukaiyama, 2011). In the final version of the work⁹, diverse media - an installation with two pianos which were destroyed by the tsunami, video with images of the devastated region and recorded sounds of children of that area, and classical piano music - were weaved together in a proposal of dialoguing about an event of collective memory through an art work.

My project *for her* aimed to extend this idea of the political message into the piano recital, particularly related to the theme of human trafficking and sexual exploitation of girls and young women, by proposing to the audience some reflections within the artistic experience.

Method - Experimental performances and the 'defamiliarization' strategy

This project is a piano recital which presents three structural elements: music programme featuring classical piano pieces with references to girls or women in their titles, dolls placed among the audience, and short stories of victims and information about human trafficking and sexual exploitation of girls and young women.

The music pieces were an initial tool to approach the theme, through my piano performance. They were chosen with an intention of setting a feminine tone to the programme, as if each piece was an abstract story about a girl or a young woman. Subsequently, the stories of victims and punctual data were the means to communicate objectively the theme of human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Due to the aim to communicate a very objective theme, I was confronted with the urge to break the familiarity of the physical setting of my piano recital in this project, in order to allow new channels for the experience of the social message. As Crawford's points, “worn-out and devalued combinations of motifs and devices have to be broken up and recombined in order to generate new perception” (Crawford, 1984, p. 211).

In pursuit of increasing the impact of the social message within the artistic work, I came across Shklovsky's *defamiliarization*, or *estrangement*, technique, which is understood as the necessity to make strange objects that were once familiar, and to complicate forms, in order to “make perception long and laborious” (Shklovsky, 1990, p. 6).

In *for her* we could identify three elements presented in a *defamiliarized* form:

1. a recital piano room set in an unusual way - dolls among the audience – a familiar (through conventions) space with objects that usually would belong to another context;
2. dolls displaced from their usual context – instead of being in a room set for children, they are in a space for music performance;
3. musical pieces, initially conceived as “pure music”, brought into an extra-musical context, which could momentarily give them an aspect of programme music.

⁹ Multimedia concert presented for the Japan Society, New York, 2013.
<http://revistas.ua.pt/index.php/impar>

As part of the process of development of this project, two experimental recitals were performed as *work-in-progress*¹⁰.

Performance 1

The performance took place in a medium size practice room with a baby grand piano and audience seats set in a semi-circle shape. The room was prepared with several dolls placed on the floor among the audience seats. There were music programme sheets¹¹ available, also including some links for websites of organisations which act against human trafficking.

In between the performance of the pieces, short texts with stories and information about the theme were projected on the wall. The first projected texts introduced the theme with data about human trafficking nowadays. Gradually the texts began to feature testimonies of victims, increasing in length and tension in the content of the stories. The performer - who is the author of this paper and a young adult female pianist - was wearing a long white dress.

The audience consisted of a group of approximately eight PhD students and a supervisor from Oxford Brookes University Interdisciplinary Arts Department.

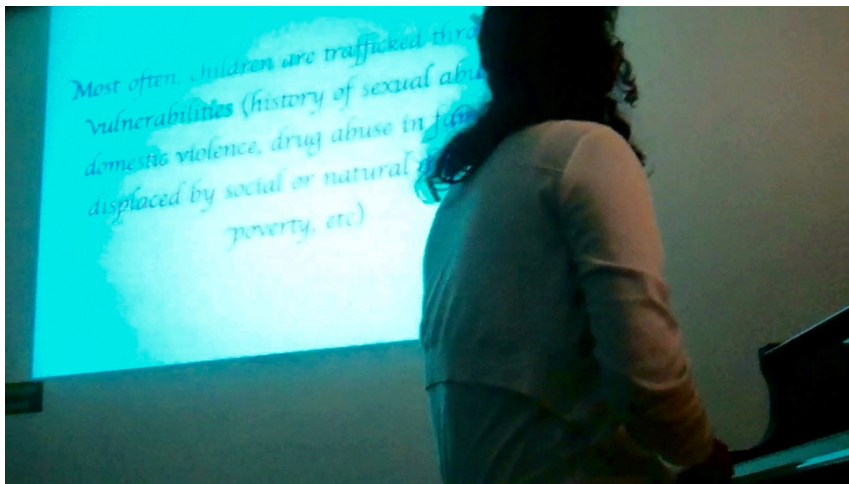


Figure 1. *for her* version 1: projected texts. Oxford Brookes University, 03 November 2014. Still from video documentation. Video courtesy: Aya Kasai.

¹⁰ Since the first version of this article, this project has been performed as public concerts to audiences in Portugal, Brazil, and in the UK. Documentation of those performances are available at <https://kesiadecote.wordpress.com/phd-research/for-her/>

¹¹ Music programme: 1. Beethoven - *Für Elise* (excerpt); 2. Pärt - *Für Alina*; 3. Pärt - *Für Anna Maria*; 4. Debussy - *La fille aux cheveux de lin*; 5. Ginastera - *Danza de la moza donosa*; 6. Villa-Lobos - *Uma camponesa cantadeira*.
<http://revistas.ua.pt/index.php/impar>



Figure 2. *for her* version 1: dolls among the audience. Oxford Brookes University, 03 November 2014. Still from video documentation. Video courtesy: Aya Kasai.

Findings from audience feedback on Performance 1

The performance was immediately followed by an informal verbal feedback session, when firstly the audience gave their comments, and secondly the session was open for the artist to answer questions and clarify some elements and intentions.

A sense of anticipation was related as the result of the first element faced by the audience. The unusual setting of the room - dolls placed among the audience - resulted in a feeling of strangeness, which quietly triggered questions about what would happen in that space. The girl-referenced titles of the music pieces helped to build up the sense of expectation, and to provide clues for the audience to unravel the thematic gradually. In addition, the waiting for the performer and, eventually, her entrance in white outfit, helped to build that sense of anticipation. The audience perception was perhaps more open than usual, therefore, to receive new information.

Some members of the audience mentioned being firstly impacted with a sense of childhood and sweetness, especially when listening to the first music piece of the programme - an extract of Beethoven's *Für Elise*, as well as when reading the title of the recital being projected in a soft text font at the beginning of the performance. These initial impressions helped to build a horizon of expectations - which could be identified as the first step towards the construction of the experience of the work (Bennett, 1997, p. 99) - which was to be frustrated during the gradual introduction of the theme.

As the theme of child trafficking and prostitution was being presented, the sense of initial sweetness of the work was challenged in the audience's perception. As a consequence of that twist in the perception, and due to the *defamiliarization* technique, the impact of the communication of the social message could be enhanced.

By *defamiliarizing* the dolls - i.e. by removing them from their typical association - they could present a "fresh and uneffaced side in a sort of textual space for our perception" (Crawford, 1984, p. 210). For some members of the audience, the dolls suggested connotations of childhood which - especially when put together with the whiteness of the costume of the performer and its connotation of purity and innocence - could provoke reflections about the loss faced by the girls who were victims of trafficking.

In addition, a narrative sense was observed, emerging from the increase in tension during the performance. This intensification was noted as the stories of the victims gradually became more alarming, whilst the music material was increasing in dissonance.

Although the projection of texts was an efficient strategy to bring an objective message, I was concerned about the didactic resemblance of such an element. Moreover, that strategy had limitations to engage people, since it was stated by some members of the audience that, for varied reasons, they did not read some of the projected texts. Considering those factors, I decided to use audio clips to share the social theme in the second performance of this project.

Some inquiries were made about possible associations between the composers and the thematic of the project, which urged the clarification that such association would not correspond to true facts.

Performance 2

The second performance of this project took place in the same room and featured similar spatial settings - audience seats set in a semi-circle shape and dolls placed among them. However, as a new element, a soundscape of voices of children was being played when the audience entered the room.

The music repertoire was similar to the first performance, however there was one modification in the order of the pieces¹². In this performance, audio clips with testimonies were played, instead of using written text to share the stories of victims and information about human trafficking. The pianist was wearing white shirt, short black skirt and pink tights.

The audience consisted mostly of the same group of people from the previous performance, except for two guests who attended the second performance only.



Figure 3. *for her* version 2. Oxford Brookes University, 15 December 2014. Photo courtesy: Pier Corona.

12 Music programme: 1. Beethoven - *Für Elise* (excerpt); 2. Pärt - *Für Alina*; 3. Debussy - *La fille aux cheveux de lin*; 4. Ginastera - *Danza de la moza donosa*; 5. Villa-Lobos - *Uma camponesa cantadeira*; 6. Pärt - *Für Anna Maria*.

Findings from the audience feedback on Performance 2

The feedback was collected similarly to the first performance of this project - through an informal session of comments, questions and answers immediately after the recital.

In this second performance of the project *for her*, the playing of a soundscape of voices of children while the audience entered the room was an additional unusual element in a piano recital, which helped to enhance the sense of anticipation on the audience.

Generally, the strategy of playing audio clips was observed as more impacting than the projection of texts on the previous performance, although I considered the result of the audio excerpts less integrated within the fluidity of the performance.

In addition, a question about the apparent untouched position of the classical musician was raised. Despite all the unusual elements presented in this piano recital, for the audience, the performer seemed to remain in a separated world. Still concerning the performer element, the image of a female pianist was meant in a social reflection about the contrast between that classical musician figure and the victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation who, despite being similarly female ones, did not have the opportunity to develop their skills.

In this second version of the project, a state of resolution/ balance was recalled at the end of the performance, by playing the soundscape of children again, as well as by setting a lighter piece of music to finish the programme.

My personal experience as the interpreter of this work was of a considerable emotional engagement, what made it a difficult project to be live performed.

Conclusion

This work demonstrated successfully an approach of a piano recital as an opportunity to discuss social themes. The application of Shklovsky's *defamiliarization* technique was reported as an efficient strategy to raise a sense of anticipation in the audience and open the perception to the content of the work. The sense of narrative perceived from the strategic succession of musical pieces and stories helped to engage the audience with the theme.

In addition, the featuring of a female performer inspired some additional reflections about the situation of trafficked girls and young women. Reflections about the contrast between the figure of the female classical musician and the exploited girls demonstrated the urge for an investigation about how to engage better the performer figure into the context of the project.

This work could be considered a challenging proposal for both performer and audience in its multiple elements and dense thematic. For the interpreter, it requires reflections concerning how to manage a meaningful engagement with the theme and self-control against the emotional impact of the social content, in order to still allow concentration for an accurate musical performance.

In summary, the project *for her* was commented as being an efficient proposal to raise awareness about human trafficking and sexual exploitation of girls and young women. However, it requires attentive reflections about the balance between art and advertising, as well as further development focusing on unity of the various elements into a cohesive multidisciplinary art work.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StWVA8mZGe4>

<http://revistas.ua.pt/index.php/impar>

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