

Composing with the More-Than-Human: A Study of Reciprocal Voices

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of requirements for the degree of
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Declaration

I, Hao Zhen, hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that it contains no material previously published or written by another person. This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of a higher degree. I confirm that the ideas, arguments, and written content of this thesis are my own, and that no content was generated using artificial intelligence tools.

Signed:  _____

Date: 04/04/2025

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge that this thesis and the works it explores were primarily composed on the unceded land of the Eora Nation, the traditional custodians of what is and always will be Gadigal Country. This land—its rhythms, textures, and people—has guided me to think about the intricate relationships between humans and the more-than-human world.

I owe a profound debt of thanks to my supervisor, Prof. Liza Lim, whose insight, patience, and confidence have been indispensable throughout my research. Her guidance has shaped every aspect of this thesis and the works it centres. I am also thankful to the program leader, Dr. Paul Stanhope, my co-supervisor, Dr. Damien Ricketson, for their fresh perspectives and valuable input throughout the process.

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pianist Jake Cheong (*Three Haiku*), Conductor Brett Weymark, Sydney Philharmonia Choir (*The Sea*), Flinders Quartet (*Not Fish*), Director Lindy Hume, Dramaturg Sally Blackwood, Repetiteur and Vocal Coach Allan Hicks, wonderful cast and friends Molly Ryan, Leyang Hong, Wesley Yu, Sophie Blades, Matthew Hilberts, and Sam Elmi (*The Lullaby*).

Finally, I wish to thank my parents, Luan and Qingsong, for their unwavering kindness and encouragement.

Portfolio of Compositions

1. *Three Haiku* (2023)

for baritone and piano

Premiere: 27 Sep 2023

Baritone—Simon Lobelson

Piano—Jake Cheong

Festival of Art Song, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Sydney, Australia

Duration: 14'36

2. *The Sea* (2023)

for choir (SATB)

Recorded: 26 Sep 2023

Conductor: Brett Weymark

Sydney Philharmonia Choir

Verbrugghen Hall, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Sydney, Australia

Duration: 9'36

3. *Not Fish* (2024)

For string quartet

Premiere: 21 Feb 2024

Flinders Quartet

Violin I—Zoë Black

Violin II—Elizabeth Sellars

Viola—Helen Ireland

Violoncello—Zoe Knighton

Noisy Ritual, Brunswick East, Melbourne, Australia

Duration: 8'13

4. *The Lullaby* (2024)

A chamber opera for three sopranos, two tenors and baritone

Ensemble of 13 musicians: flute, clarinet, oboe, baritone saxophone, horn,
trumpet, trombone, percussion, piano, violin, viola, violoncello, double bass

Premiere: 28 Oct 2024, with further performances on Oct 30, Nov 1, Nov 2

Director—Lindy Hume

Dramaturg—Sally Blackwood

Conductor—Simon Lobelson

Mother (Soprano) —Molly Ryan

June (Soprano) — Leyang Hong

Scout (Tenor) —Wesley Yu

Snake Skin 1 (Soprano) —Sophie Blades

Snake Skin 2 (Tenor) —Sam Elmi

Snake Skin 3 (Baritone) —Matthew Hilberts

Violin 1—Isaac Shatford

Violin 2—Violeta Shopova

Viola—Somerset Peede

Cello—Francis Yoon

Double Bass—Alexandra Thompson

Flute—Sam Roberts

Oboe—Theodore Brown

Clarinet—Tim Roberts

Bassoon—Summer Edwards

Saxophone—Holly Williams

Horn—Kit Stone

Trumpet—Cindy Hu

Trombone—Josh de Haan

Percussion—Bill Chen, Anneke Brahe

Piano/ Repetiteur—Alan Hicks

Parade Theatre, National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA), Sydney, Australia

Duration: 28'00

Abstract

This practice-led research explores the concept of reciprocity between humans and the more-than-human world through four distinct composition projects: *Three Haiku* (art song), *The Sea* (choir), *Not Fish* (string quartet), and *The Lullaby* (chamber opera). Drawing on cross-cultural theoretical frameworks (Born, Zhuangzi, Ingold, and Abram amongst others), the study explores sound as a medium for relational dynamics that foster co-creation and mutual transformation.

Rather than merely representing natural elements, these compositions facilitate exchanges where sound emerges as a dynamic process, connecting human and more-than-human agencies. Reciprocity is approached as an emergent, evolving relationship, explored through musical practices that emphasise exchange, resonance, and co-creation.

This thesis, with the portfolio of compositions, demonstrates how music-making is more than a human endeavour—it is a collaborative act that emerges through real and imagined interactions between human and more-than-human forces. The research offers a way of understanding sound as a practice of coexistence, one that reflects and amplifies the interconnected rhythms of life. By focusing on interaction and the emergent results of these projects, I aim to contribute to a perspective on the role of music in reflecting and deepening our relationship with the environment.

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1 Introduction

This thesis explores how sound can facilitate reciprocal connections between humans and the more-than-human world, creating spaces for interaction and shared experiences.

How does music create opportunities for engagement with the broader rhythms of life? How can musical practice reveal the intricate relationships between different living or non-living forces?

These questions form the basis of my exploration, using sound as a medium to cultivate moments of exchange and resonance. Sound exists as a connecting force, embodying the interwoven, dynamic nature of life.

At the core of this exploration is the idea of interaction—how sound can foster connections and create spaces for new ways of being together.

This research also considers how sound can guide us into states of openness and listening. In *Three Haiku* (2023), the piano's irregular patterns mimic ripples in water, inviting performers and listeners into an intimate relationship with stillness and motion. In *The Sea* (2023), the choir explores the resonance of the sea through improvisation, the voices of the choir merging with the imagined vastness of water. *Not Fish* (2023) engages with volatile sounds and the possibility of an in-between state where human and fish coexist as part of a larger continuum. *The Lullaby* (2024), through its layered sonic and visual elements, creates an eerie dreamscape where human and snakes, self and environment dissolve into one another. Across these works, sound becomes a medium for exchange, attunement, and transformation.

This study highlights the relational power of sound, proposing that music nurtures interactions that foster collaboration and co-existence. The four composition projects provided opportunities to explore reciprocity through working closely with performers, librettists, and theatre practitioners, as well as engaging with more-than-human entities such as fish, rocks, and water. These diverse partnerships were essential in shaping abstract musical concepts into vibrant, temporal experiences. Together with performers, theatre practitioners, and the natural world, we shaped works that embodied connection and transformation. Through these collaborative processes, I developed an understanding of reciprocity as a practice rooted in co-creation, encompassing both human and more-than-human agencies.

2 Temporalizing Reciprocity

Reciprocity, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is “the quality or state of being reciprocal: mutual dependence, action, or influence”.¹ This definition highlights the dynamic and relational nature of reciprocity—an ongoing process where one action invites another, creating a web of engagement. Reciprocity emerges as a state of active exchange, characterized by an evolving interplay of gestures and responses.

David Abram’s *The Spell of the Sensuous* offers an extension of this definition by framing reciprocity as inherent to perception itself. Abram argues that perception is participatory: the perceiver and the perceived are co-constitutive, shaping one another through their interaction.² To perceive the world is to engage with it in a reciprocal relationship, where humans and the more-than-human are both active participants. Reciprocity, in this sense, highlights the interconnected nature of perception, where humans and the more-than-human engage in an ongoing relational process.

Sound serves as a medium to temporalize reciprocity. Its inherently unfolding nature creates a space where human and more-than-human forces can come into relation. Sound moves across boundaries, enabling interactions that are fluid, emergent, and rooted in time. Through the compositions in this research, reciprocity is embodied not as a fixed state but as a process—a continuous becoming that reflects the entangled nature of all entities.

In the early stages of this research, I presumed reciprocity to involve an "equal" exchange between humans and more-than-human entities. For example, in composing

¹ Inc Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage*. (Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1994).

² David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 34.

my choral work, *The Sea*, I initially sought a balanced interaction where the choir and the ocean metaphorically "equally participated." However, I soon realised that reciprocity does not conform to fixed models. It is not about achieving a pre-determined equilibrium but about fostering an *experiential* form of exchange. This shift in perspective allowed me to explore the fluidity and permeability inherent in reciprocal relationships. As ecosystems operate through uneven yet interconnected processes, my composition projects now embrace these complexities.

This research also challenged my initial analytical approach. I attempted to draw broad conclusions about reciprocity based on my four compositions. This approach risked oversimplifying the concept, which inherently resists homogenisation. To address this, I structured the research into independent case studies, each focusing on a single composition: *The Sea* (2023), *Not Fish* (2023), *Three Haiku* (2023), and *The Lullaby* (2024). Each chapter examines specific manifestations of reciprocity, avoiding any totalisation or overarching narrative. This methodology aligns with the nature of reciprocity itself, which thrives on openness and multiplicity.

2.1 Musical Contextualisation

The three compositional approaches identified below respond to natural beings. They are not intended to reduce the complexity of musical responses to more-than-human entities but rather to provide a comparative framework that contextualises my compositional approach.

The first approach is representational or mimetic. From Antonio Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* (1725) to Franz Schubert's Piano Quintet in A Major, D. 667, "*Die Forelle*" (1819), to Claude Debussy's *La Mer* (1905), composers rendered impressions of the natural world through musical elements such as melody, rhythm, and timbre.

The second approach is soundscape-based. Composers expanded upon these purely musical approaches by integrating technology and field recordings, placing listeners directly into immersive natural contexts. Examples include Annea Lockwood's *Sound Map of the Hudson River* (1982–1989), Jana Winderen's *Spring Bloom in the Marginal Ice Zone* (2017), and Chris Watson's *Weather Report* (2003).

The third category is experiential. Artists such as Olafur Eliasson and Alice Furry created immersive installations that directly engage sensory experience, emphasising physical and spatial interaction.

Recent composers I draw inspiration from often overlap between categories and move beyond purely mimetic or purely experiential approaches. Liza Lim's composition *Extinction Events and Dawn Chorus* (2018) engages “assemblage of materials” including “found, imagined, and damaged objects”³ and reflects “human-made ecological crisis” and “the circulatory forces of ocean gyres”.⁴ As the composer noted, “the violinist demarcates the spatial coordinates of the performance space with her body, with a transit from the back of the hall to the stage carrying the emblematic piece of plastic cellophane.”⁵

My own compositional approach emphasises perception tied to bodily presence through space, exemplified by tactile gestures such as the touching of rocks and notions of trans-corporeality in my opera *The Lullaby*. My compositions do not directly imitate environmental processes but evoke their unpredictability through asymmetrical patterns, as seen in *Three Haiku*, and through indeterminate notations in *The Sea*. Although these pieces might visually conform to Western Art Music notation, my graphical thinking is

³ Liza Lim, “An Ecology of Time Traces in Extinction Events and Dawn Chorus,” *Contemporary Music Review* 39, no. 5 (2020): 560.

⁴ Lim, 546.

⁵ Lim, 553.

inspired by Chinese poetic devices (互文, hùwén) and pictograms, exploring these cultural references as conceptual starting points.

The following discussion examines the theoretical grounding of sound as a field of relations and explores its potential to bridge human and more-than-human agencies through its temporal, resonant, and participatory qualities.

2.2 Sound as Relations

Georgina Born's work serves as a foundation for understanding sound as inherently relational. In her essay “On Nonhuman Sound—Sound as Relation,” Born moves away from sound as a static object, emphasising that sound is not merely a material phenomenon, but a “sonic assemblage”, a dynamic relay of mediations that encompass human and nonhuman forces.⁶ Born’s approach rejects dualistic perspectives that prioritise human intentionality over nonhuman process. She describes sound as co-produced by material, cultural, and environmental factors.⁷ Her reflections, particularly her personal account of listening to rain on a polycarbonate roof, illustrates sound’s capacity to evoke subjective responses while underscoring its inescapable relationality. Her narrative emphasises the contingent interplay between sound and the listener, shaped by material conditions, personal movement, and environmental factors.

While Born’s framework offers a thought-provoking model of relationality, it also presents challenges in navigating the language required to describe the entanglements. Her evocative language tends to recentralise the subjectivity of the human listener. Her engagement with the rain or the hum of a hospital bed positions sounds as relational

⁶ Georgina Born, “On Nonhuman Sound—Sound as Relation,” in *Sound Objects* (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2020), 199.

⁷ Born, 187.

partners, but ultimately filters the significance through her affect. Born's framework highlights the difficulty of decentring human experience while addressing relational soundscapes.

The difficulty prompted me to turn to David Abram, whose work situates relationality in the immediacy of perception. Abram emphasises the embodied and multi-sensory nature of human-environment interactions, offering a grounded vocabulary for describing sound's relational qualities without over-emphasising human subjectivity.

2.3 Reciprocal Nature of Perception

David Abrams idea of the "reciprocal nature of perception," as explored in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1997), establishes perception as an inherently mutual act. The perceiver and the perceived mutually shape one another in a dynamic, relational process. He stresses the "reciprocal presence of the sentient in the sensible and the sensible in the sentient".⁸

This idea challenges traditional Cartesian notions of perception, which separate the subject from the object. Instead, Abram aligns with phenomenological perspectives, particularly those of Merleau-Ponty, who emphasised the lived body as both perceiving and perceived. In this framework, perception is understood as a participatory process involving various embodied entities. Abram poses a question: "if perception, in its depth, is truly participatory, why do we not experience the rest of the world as animate and alive?"⁹

⁸ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 66.

⁹ Abram, 91.

In this framework, rather than fixating on how and why humans, animals, and the more-than-human exert their agency differently, Abrams frames the world as something subjective, directly experienced through embodied perception. By doing so, he bypasses the need for a common ground defined by actions, language, or signals, which tend to externalise agency and create artificial distinctions between beings. Instead, Abram focuses on what is exchanged: “subjectivities,” or different “centres of experience.”¹⁰ The life-world is “an intertwined matrix of sensations and perceptions, a collective field of experience lived through from many different angles”.¹¹

Different sensations and perceptions from various sentient beings come into awareness, not through deliberate action or movement, but as part of an intersubjective process.¹² Reciprocity, therefore, does not necessarily require overt responsiveness or interaction; rather, it emerges through shared, embodied presence.

2.4 Thinking Through Making

Tim Ingold diverges from David Abram’s use of the term “intersubjectivity,” critiquing it for reducing relationality to a simple back-and-forth between distinct subjects.¹³ Instead, Ingold focuses on the “midstream of correspondence,” where relations are fluid and evolving rather than transactional or mediated by fixed endpoints. “This is an immanent life lived midstream, in the in-between, where there are no subjects, no objects, no subject-object hybrids; only verbs.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Abram, 39.

¹¹ Abram, 39.

¹² Abram, 39.

¹³ Tim Ingold, “In-Between,” in *The Life of Lines*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2015), 151.

¹⁴ Ingold, 152.

Instead of terminations and resolutions, correspondence exists in a perpetual state of becoming.¹⁵ Ingold's focus on verbs—as opposed to nouns—captures this sense of ongoing relational flow, bypassing the duality of subject and object. His framework invites me to think of relationships not as things to be defined but as processes that unfold dynamically, without predetermined ends.

As a musician, I engage with Ingold's aesthetics of making through the act of composition. My research is not a detached theoretical exploration, but an experiential inquiry shaped by the practice of music-making. Each composition becomes a site of reciprocal dialogue, where I interact with both human and more-than-human beings as a co-creative force. This approach mirrors Ingold's idea that making is a way of knowing—a dynamic, embodied process that cannot be separated from the outcome it produces.

In this sense, my research serves as a recording of reciprocity in action rather than an attempt to represent or prescribe what human/more-than-human relationships should be. It remains open and responsive, evolving in alignment with Ingold's aesthetics of thinking through making. Through composing, I immerse myself in the continual process of becoming, and explore how sound and relationships emerge, transform, and resonate across time and space.

¹⁵ Ingold, 152.

3 Three Haiku

3.1 Introduction

Three Haiku (2023), a song cycle for baritone and piano uses text from Matsuo Basho's haiku. Basho (1644–1694), a Japanese poet of the Edo period, often drew upon the natural world to capture the transience of life. The movements of the song cycle each centre on a specific animal—a frog, a butterfly, and fish—offering a journey into the fleeting rhythms and delicate interconnections of the natural world. The first movement reflects the frog's leap into an ancient pond, evoking timelessness and the cyclical rhythms of life. The second depicts a butterfly's delicate movement, settling on “odourless” grass. The final movement resonates with the shared sadness of a bird and a fish, mourning the departure of Spring.

Through principles of *wabi-sabi* (appreciation of imperfection and incompleteness),¹⁶ *ma* (the space between),¹⁷ and *mono no aware* (sensitivity to ephemerality),¹⁸ the piece creates an intimate interplay between the performers, audience, and natural elements. These aesthetic principles provide an expressive frame for cultivating a relational, meditative experience.

¹⁶ Graham Parkes and Adam Loughnane, “Japanese Aesthetics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2024), 2, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2024/entries/japanese-aesthetics/>.

¹⁷ Parkes and Loughnane, 2.

¹⁸ Parkes and Loughnane, 4.

3.2 Asymmetry



Figure 1: mm 1-3, mov 1, *Three Haiku*

The piano figure (see figure 1) in the first movement evokes ripples in an ancient pond through an asymmetrical short-long rhythmic pattern. These ripples, unpredictable and irregular, reflect the principle of *wabi-sabi*, where beauty lies in imperfection and variability. The two piano voices move independently, creating a texture that mirrors the fluid motion of overlapping ripples. The lines are offset by a semitone, never fully converging into unison, which I explored to generate a sense of tension and proximity that embodies *ma*—the active space between them.

This subtle temporal dissonance emphasises the sense of indeterminacy, as the lines create a delicate balance between separation and connection. The relational space between them, like the intervals between ripples, is dynamic and alive with potential. The interplay of movement and stillness invites the listener into a contemplative engagement and resonates with transient beauty in Basho's haiku.

3.3 Breathing Bodies

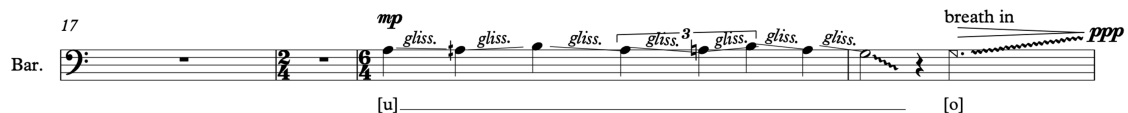


Figure 2: mm 17-20, mov. 1, *Three Haiku*

Wind, the natural movement of air, is embodied in the singer's breathing. The art song deprioritises verbal communication, emphasising pre-verbal, elemental sound-

making. Text appears only as an interlude, connecting the rhythms of wind, water, and human.

The baritone's line (see figure 2) undulates in microtonal or small intervals, mimicking the ebb of wind. Glissandi with subtle vibrati create a texture that resists fixed pitches and reflect the transient and fluid qualities of wind. These gestures evoke *mono no aware*, or the feeling of the impermanence and unpredictability of wind. Following a moment of silence, the baritone inhales into *ppp*, as though the undulating wind dissolves within him.

Air, described by Abram as “animating and sustaining the whole of the sensible world”,¹⁹ is for me the unseen medium connecting the singer and the landscape. Incorporating breath as a colour creates “a continuous dialogue that unfolds below verbal awareness— and often, even independent of the verbal awareness”.²⁰

3.4 Touching

Touching is not merely an act of physical contact; it is a process of relational becoming. In the first movement, the act of touching rocks and engaging with their circular motions connects the performer with the natural world on a tactile level. Each rock has its unique rhythm, timbre, and texture. Touching creates a reciprocal experience: “a process of correspondence: not the imposition of preconceived form on raw material substance, but the drawing out or bringing forth of potentials immanent in a world of becoming”.²¹ This perspective of Ingold's reframes touch as an active

¹⁹ Abram, 248.

²⁰ Abram, 256.

²¹ Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, 1st ed. (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2013), 31.

dialogue where both the performer and the rocks are co-creators in the unfolding sonic process.

The unevenness of the rocks reflects *wabi-sabi*, the Japanese aesthetic that values imperfection and irregularity. Moving two rocks against each other produces fluctuating timbres and reflects indeterminacy. Sound embodies the material quality of the rocks, their shape, hardness, and age. As the performer holds and rocks and rubs them in circular motions, the performer encounters their inherent materiality and temporality and enters a dialogue with their "history." The act of touch itself becomes an encounter with *ma*—the space between human action and the rock's response. This space is dynamic, not empty, and it frames the tactile exchange as a relational process.

"To touch is also to feel oneself being touched."²² The rocks' unique properties allow them to express these intrinsic qualities when engaged with. The performer not only activates the rocks but can also experience their presence as animate and self-reflective. This mutual exchange situates the rocks as active participants in the performance. Through touching, sound becomes a clump of sensations.

3.5 Fluid Embodiment

1 ♩=65

Bar. 4/4

hum with gliss. (applied to all the notes in a slur) to mimic crying

mf

unless marked, improvise with [a][e][i][o][ei][m]

Figure 3: Baritone part, mm 1-5, mov. 3, *Three Haiku*

The text in the third movement of *Three Haiku*, "Departing spring—birds cry, in the fishes' eyes and tears," exemplifies a process of dis-identification from the human

²² Abram, 69.

world. The musical setting embraces syllabic abstraction and deviates from conventional linguistic frameworks.

The use of improvised syllables in this movement mirrors the lineage of works like Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate* (1925) which liberated vocal phonetics from semantic constraints, and György Ligeti's *Aventures* (1963), where extended vocal techniques turned syllables into carriers of raw emotion and narrative abstraction. In Chaya Czernowin's *Pnima... Ins Innere* (1999), the absence of language and use of pure syllabic sounds become a medium for embodying trauma and unspoken affect.

In the third movement of the *Haiku*, syllables act as intermediaries between human and non-human expression. Singing unbinds the voice from language and meanings. The nonsensical utterances of the baritone (see figure 3) suggest a detachment from human-centric experiences and open possibilities to channel the sadness of birds and fish in an uncanny act of vocal otherness.

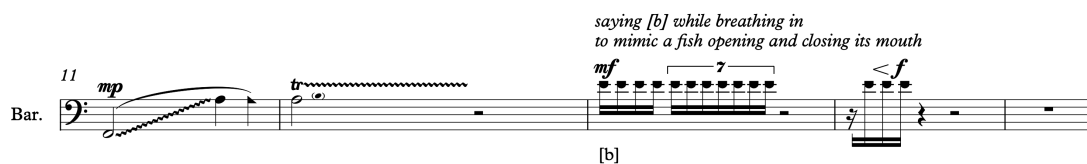


Figure 4: Baritone mm 11-15, mov. 3, *Three Haiku*

Figure 4 (mm13-15) illustrates the vocalisation of a bubbling sound, mirroring the rhythmic release of air as fish breathe underwater. Here, the baritone embodies the dual identity of a human and a fish, evoking the concept of *acousmêtre*—a voice that seems untethered from its physical source.²³ *Acousmêtre* is a portmanteau based on two French words, *acousmatique* (acousmatic) and *Stre* (being).²⁴ This term becomes a metaphor for the sonic practice in movement 3, where the baritone's singing exists

²³ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, Second edition. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019), 218.

²⁴ Chion, 218.

“neither inside nor outside”²⁵ the fish’s body. The bubbling sound signifies the fish’s presence—“present yet unattainable”.²⁶ By replacing textual clarity with “fish-like” syllables, the music amplifies the voice of a more-than-human presence, even though the physical presence of the fish is not visible on stage.

This approach fosters a space where more-than-human voices can emerge. The double-identification of the baritone with both human and fish proposes an alienated yet resonant experience for performers and audiences where they might perhaps inhabit a shared ghostly liminality. In this liminality, the baritone’s voice becomes both vulnerable and permeable, straddling the boundary between human and other.

At the close of the song cycle (see figure 5), the bird motif, fish motif, vocal lines, and piano merge into a collective moment of crying. The fish’s crying (baritone, mm68-69) integrates the minor second intervals from the bird’s motif (piano, mm66-67), while the bird’s crying (piano, mm 67-69) inhabits the intervallic and textural feature in the fish’s sound (baritone, mm 67-68). The permeance creates a shared sound of collective mourning. I compose a collapse of boundaries to evoke the interconnectedness of human, fish, and bird in an emotional and resonant way.

The musical score for mm 66-69, mov. 3, *Three Haiku*, consists of three staves. The top staff is for the Baritone (Bar.), the middle for the Piano (Pno.), and the bottom for the bird motif. The Baritone staff has a 'fish' section (mm 66-67) with notes [ke] and [ka], and a 'crying' section (mm 68-69) with notes [m] and [m]. The Piano staff has a 'bird' section (mm 66-67) and a 'crying' section (mm 68-69). The bird motif staff has a 'crying' section (mm 68-69). The score is marked with dynamics p, pp, and mp.

Figure 5: mm 66-69, mov. 3, *Three Haiku*

²⁵ Chion, 129.

²⁶ Chion, 125.

3.6 Reflection on *Three Haiku*

Three Haiku invites the audience to inhabit a world of shifting relationships between human and more-than-human entities. The piece explores an ambiguous space: between still contemplation and the animate ripples of water; between the tactile resonance of rocks and the sensations of the performer; and between a human voice and the shared sadness of birds and fish. In creating these spaces, I attempt to reflect the impermanence and interconnectedness central to Japanese aesthetics: *mono no aware*, where transient beauty is deeply felt, *wabi-sabi*, the acceptance of imperfection, and *ma*, the dynamic interplay between sound and silence. Composing with parameters of asymmetry, fluid embodiment, and tactile engagement, I offer the possibility of moving beyond fixed boundaries to invite a state of openness and transformation.

4 Post-Human Body Extension in *The Sea*

The Sea, written in 2023, is a piece commissioned by the Sydney Philharmonia Choir as part of the “Words, Text, Voices, Music” program. In this piece, I aim to blur the boundaries between human expression and natural forces to create a dynamic interplay where the qualities of these entities influence and shape each other. The sea breathes and encompasses. The choir absorbs and internalises the energy of the sea. The piece is a collective meditation about the sea.

In “Musical Vitalities”, Holly Watkins states that through music, “we unconsciously experiment with being other.”²⁷ She argues that, “music both diversifies the self and extends it toward other selves in motion, whether real or imaginary, human or not.”²⁸ The message implied by Watkins is that the self is not static; the self is able to reach beyond its immediate, isolated sense of identity. In this chapter, I would like to frame my analysis of *The Sea* under the idea of “extension of the self”—how sound evokes an extension of human expression in resonance with the forces of nature. Watkins’ ideas align with how I posit indeterminate notation, lyrics, and temporality constantly shaped by the vastness and ever-changing nature of the ocean.

4.1 Definition of “Extension”

“Extension” assumes that something inhabits space and time, with an ability to expand beyond its current immediate physical boundaries and temporal limit. In the context of vocal writing, S. Wilson argues that the voice, “resonating both within and

²⁷ Holly Watkins, *Musical Vitalities: Ventures in a Biotic Aesthetics of Music*, 1st ed., New Material Histories of Music (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 2.

²⁸ Watkins, 2.

beyond bodies”, is “engaged as an extension of the body”.²⁹ His statement implies that the voice bridges boundaries, between that of internal body space and the surroundings that the voice envelops, also between that of immediate physical presence and temporal continuity. This concept of the voice as a bridge, as a means of connecting with something larger than the individual, informs the compositional approach in *The Sea*.

The Sea

Hao Zhen
2023

Imagine being hugged by the sea and make a sound.

① [ca.20''] ② [ca.15'']

SOPRANO *ppp* *f* *p* *mf*

ALTO *ppp* *f* *p* *mf*

TENOR *ppp* *f* *p* *mf*

BASS *ppp* *f* *p* *mf*

③ [ca.10''] ④ [ca.15'']

S. *pp* [ma] *mf* like winds *gliss.* *gliss.* [ya] *mp*

A. *pp* [ya] *breathy* repeat fragments, with space, getting slower *p*

T. *mf* like winds *gliss.* *gliss.* [ya] *mp* [ma] *mp*

B. *pp* [ma] [ma] *mp*

Figure 6: opening improvisation, *The Sea*

²⁹ Samuel Wilson, “The Composition of Posthuman Bodies,” *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 13, no. 2 (2017): 147-148.

4.2 Improvising Bodies

12

Choir divides into two groups. Choir one: using previous note as tonic sing major chord, full frequency, each voice on a different note growing and fading as indicated. Choir Two: Imitate a storm at sea; ferocious lashings of waves and howling of wind. All techniques + any notes permitted, but keep the effect musical.

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Figure 7: page 12, imitation of storm, waves, and wind, *Miniwanka*, R. Murray Schafer³⁰

In *The Sea*, indeterminate notation invites the performers to imagine, embody the ocean, and mirror the spontaneous qualities of tides, winds, and waves (see figure 6). This approach recalls the improvisational elements in R. Murray Schafer's *Miniwanka* (1971), where vocalists emulate natural sounds of water. Figure 7 shows the notation Schafer uses with graphics that indicate “a storm at sea”, “lashing of waves”, and

³⁰ R. Murray Schafer, *Miniwanka*, vol. 1 (Toronto: Universal Edition, 1971), 12.

“howling of wind”. The lines encourage a fluid and interpretive response from performers.

Similarly, in *The Sea*, instructions to improvise sounds beyond singing—such as breathing, whistling, or whispering—invite performers to creatively express the ocean’s textures, from calmness to turbulence. David Abram’s perspective on language as a co-creation of human and more-than-human influences directly relates to the approach in *The Sea*. He states, “language is no more the special property of the human organism than it is an expression of the animate earth that enfolds us.”³¹ Abram highlights that language is informed not only by human physical and social structures but also by the “evocative shapes and patterns of the more-than-human terrain”.³² This implies that language is not a purely human construct: it emerges from an active engagement with the living, dynamic earth.

In *The Sea*, this idea is embodied through the interplay and permeability between the choir’s improvisation and the ocean’s soundscape. The instruction reads “imagine being hugged by the sea and make a sound” (see figure 6).³³ A hug is an intimate, enveloping gesture. It that requires contact and enclosure. Although the sea cannot physically embrace the performers, this sensory experience is vividly imagined, felt, and enacted through sound. Sound becomes the tactile presence of the ocean, wrapping around the singers. Thus, when the choir members listen to each other and respond sonically, they embody both the embracing sea and the embraced individual.

³¹ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 1997, 90.

³² Abram, 90.

³³ Annea Lockwood and Pauline Oliveros both provide frameworks that resonate with the opening of *The Sea*. Lockwood’s *Sound Map of the Hudson River* (1982) uses field recordings to sculpt an immerse soundscape that invites listeners to engage with the textures of a natural river. In Oliveros’ piece *Sonic Meditations* (1971), performers are guided through verbal instructions to produce sounds that emerge from their interactions with their inner and outer worlds.

exists on the threshold between sound and silence. It is a space where sound refuses to be distinct but instead merges into the infinite. It embodies an ongoing process, a transformation where things are never static. As a liminal space, it blurs the boundaries between sound and silence, musical time with external time. The *diminuendo al niente* brings the singers to the edge of sound, where individuality fades into collective silence. Sounds and silence, self and the sea all become part of a shared continuum; the separation is only illusory. By returning to the oceanic improvisation at the end, the piece suggests an ongoing cyclical exploration and that the self is not a fixed entity but rather something that can constantly shift, expand, and merge with the environment and time around it.

4.3 Text as Soundscape

The way text is structured in *The Sea*, combined with improvisational elements, creates a layered soundscape that mirrors the cluttered, unpredictable nature of the ocean. The lyrics resemble a collage, drawing upon sources such as YouTube comments, Ernest Hemmingway's "The Old Man and the Sea", and my own reflection of ocean sounds.

The collage-like approach was inspired by the Chinese poetic device of *huwen* (互文). 互 means reciprocal, mutual; 文 means texts. It is a device where two or more parts of a text or phrase are interwoven to express a meaning that goes beyond the individual parts.³⁴ *Huwen* constitutes parts that are considered incomplete or incomprehensible by themselves. My approach with the texts juxtaposes human and oceanic elements in a non-hierarchical manner. Examples of my lyrics are as follows:

³⁴ Dehua Zhang et al., *Han yu yu fa xiu ci ci dian*, Di 1 ban., 第 1 版. (Hefei: Anhui jiao yu chu ban she, 1988), 201.

lost mother

women, mother, children

fish one two, us your you me

The world hides

(Speak) Play like young cats in the dusk.

Re Mem Ber

Meanings ripple and overlap like waves. This phrase “fish one two us your you me” begins with a seemingly simple, childlike counting game, but seamlessly transitions to include human pronouns, creating the illusion that fish and humans are part of the same continuum, equally valid subjects within the game. Each phrase, such as “women”, “mother”, “children”, carries its own meaning. However, when placed together, they evoke generational cycles and encompassing force. “The world hides” and “play like young cats” show both concealment, weight, and youthful playfulness. The repetition and fragmentation in “Re Mem Ber” disrupt the carefree spirit and remind us of the fleeting nature of experience. These seemingly isolated phrases mirror the principles of *huwen* where meaning emerges from the interaction of individual elements. This interplay—shadow, play, memory—mirrors the ocean's dynamic rhythms, where fragmentation and unity coexist. The text, like the ocean, finds unity within its own fragmentation.

4.4 Temporality in *The Sea*

8

F

55

S. *gliss.* *mf* *mp* *p* [ca.10"]

the world hides [m]

A. solo *Alto solo, Speak mysteriously* *Play like young cats in the dusk.*

A. *gliss.* *mf* *mp* *mf*

the world hides [m]

T. *gliss.* *mf* *mp* *mf*

the world hides [m]

B. *gliss.* *mf* *mp* *p*

the world hides [m]

59

S. [ca.10"] *mp* *cresc.* *mf*

re - mem - ber repeat, not coordinated

A. *mp* *cresc.* *mf*

re - mem - ber repeat, not coordinated

T. *mp* *cresc.* *mf*

re - mem - ber repeat, not coordinated

B. *mp* *cresc.* *mf*

re - mem - ber repeat, not coordinated

Figure 9: Multi-Directed Time in *The Sea*

“Time has been regarded as being and/or becoming.”³⁵ According to Kramer, time in music can be multiple-directed to form a “multiple-dimensional vector field”.³⁶ In *The Sea*, I approach time as continuous and interconnected, inspired by the textures of

³⁵ Jonathan D. Kramer, *The Time of Music: New Meanings, New Temporalities, New Listening Strategies* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1988), 19.

³⁶ Kramer, 46.

waves. Waves, by their nature, are seamless and emergent, with no strict division between one moment and the next. Similarly, the temporality in my piece is not treated as discrete or segmented, but as a fluid continuum, reflecting the interconnectedness of sound and motion in the ocean.

This perspective informs the harmonic and structural choices. The harmonic progressions in *The Sea* are colouristic rather than functional, moving without a goal-oriented trajectory. For instance, measure 57 builds towards a sense of arrival through lengthening note durations and decreasing dynamics on 'hides' (see figure 9). The resulting clustered chord, lacking a defined tonal centre, evokes a sense of stillness, even timelessness. However, this momentary stasis is immediately disrupted by the emergence of glissandi wind sounds, which evolve organically from an earlier indeterminate section.

The musical score for measures 40-45 of *The Sea* is presented for four vocal parts: Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), Tenor (T.), and Bass Solo (B. solo). The score begins at measure 40, marked with a double bar line and a repeat sign. The lyrics for the vocal parts are: "a clut-tered song a clut-tered song cal - ling you". The dynamics are marked as *f* (forte) for the first two measures, *mf* (mezzo-forte) for the third measure, and *pp* (pianissimo) for the fourth measure. The Bass Solo part has a separate line of lyrics: "He no longer dreamed of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of fish, nor fights, or contests of strength, nor of his wife." The score is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C).

Figure 10: mm 40-45, *The Sea*

In *The Sea*, the recurring harmonic clusters function as landmarks, serving as points of arrival, recurrence, and reflection. For instance, the cluster on 'hides' (mm 57) echoes the fermata chord from 'a cluttered song' (mm 42, see figure 10), creating a sense of harmonic unity and cyclical return. These clusters can also dissolve into linear textures. The “remember” section (mm 59, see figure 9) deconstructs the “cluttered song” chord (mm 42) into horizontal lines, creating an emergent and non-coordinated texture. The “cluttered song” chord unfolds in non-localised routes, creating an interplay between stasis and undulating movements. This “remember” section resists harmonic resolution and rhythmic unity, obscuring what Kramer describes as “the arrow of time”.³⁷ Instead, the piece emphasises the continuous and emergent qualities of the soundscape, where harmonic and rhythmic motion is not halted but perpetually evolving.

The Sea has a temporal framework that mirrors the layered and dynamic textures of waves. By treating time as a continuous phenomenon, I aim to dissolve rigid distinctions between “this moment” and “that moment.” Waves serve as both metaphor and structure, suggesting a temporality that is seamless and emergent rather than segmented or goal oriented. This approach resonates with the interconnectedness at the heart of *The Sea*, where soundscapes (text, singing, harmonic structure) flow and overlap, embodying the natural rhythms of the ocean.

³⁷ Kramer, 214.

5 Pictographic Origin and Sounds in *Not Fish*

Not Fish, for string quartet, is a piece written for the Flinders Quartet in 2023.³⁸

The piece is inspired by ancient Chinese hieroglyphs of “fish”, a visual representation of real fish. Unlike alphabetic scripts that show the phonetic nature of language, the Chinese character of “fish” has a pictographic origin, which may indicate a more direct connection “to the Real or thing itself” than phonetic languages.³⁹ The work experiments with possible sounds that enact the pictogram in a sonic way. In the earliest form of the character, the shape of human (人) is embedded in the calligraphy of “fish”. The piece explores whether music can creatively merge humans and fish into a larger, interconnected continuum.

5.1 Pictogram

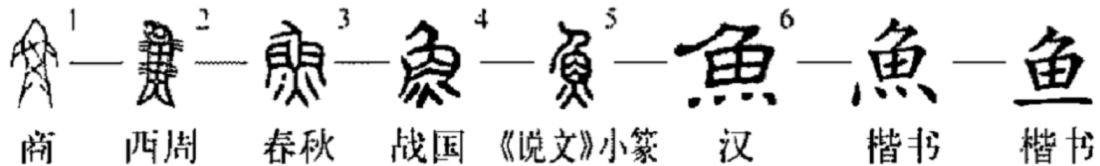


Figure 11: Origin of pictograph of “fish” (鱼)⁴⁰

Pictographs refers to the visual representation of tangible objects. Figure 11 shows the evolution of the character “fish”. The earliest Chinese representational form of fish

³⁸ Flinders Quartet’s Emerge Program is a year-long score-study, development, and mentorship program for emerging Australian composers. *Not Fish* was commissioned, workshopped, and performed by the quartet as part of the Emerge Program.

³⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pt. 14.1.70.

⁴⁰ Richard Sears, “Chinese Character And Etymology Research,” Fish, n.d., sec. 1, <https://hanziyuan.net/#鱼>.

found is the oracle bone script, carved on turtle shells and animal bones.⁴¹ In oracle bone script (character 1), one of the earliest Chinese writing systems, depicts the body, tail, and fins of the fish. The later “bronze script” (character 2) is more decorative and stylised. The shape of the fish is recognisable, especially with the tail vividly drawn and elaborated. The “seal script” (character 5) began to feature simplified curves, with the body abstracted into formalized lines. The *han* script (character 6) is more simplified, while retaining some symbolic elements that hints at the fish’s head and tail. And in “regular script”, it became the modern form of “鱼”. The details of the fish’ body, fin, and tail have been reduced to straight lines.

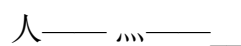


Diagram 1 Diagrammatic abstraction of 鱼 development

Above is my diagrammatic summary to illustrate the evolution of the character 鱼 (yú) . The first 人 (*ren*) stage features the presence of fish as a living being. The fluid curved lines are the natural organic form of the fish (fins and tail) as observed in early times. The 人 shape is also referential to the human form. 人 reflects the humans standing upright in harmony with the surrounding environment. This coincidence of references and meanings shows the human as part of the natural world, not in opposition to it.

⁴¹ Shan ben tu shu, *Chinese Pictograms: The Pictographic Evolution & Graphic Creation of Hanzi* (Hong Kong: SendPoints publishing, 2019), 4.

In the second stage, the tail abstracts into four dots 丶, a common radical symbolising organic forms and the element of fire. This abstraction, reminiscent of the fish's rapid, fluid movements, transforms the static image into a dynamic representation.

The last stage, the horizontal line turns pictographic figure into geometric shapes; however still reflecting the original object. The horizontal line also means “oneness” in Chinese. 一 (one) is a simple ideogram “representing the simplest origin and the most abundant chaotic whole”.⁴² In the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tsu stated that “Tao gave birth to the One, the One gave birth successively to Two things, Three things, up to ten thousand.” In response to the evolution of the Chinese character for 'fish', The string quartet employs an organicist approach, prioritising the emergent unfolding of a simple idea into a dynamic structure.

5.2 Zhuangzi's Body: Spontaneous and Dispossessed

In Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi's cosmos, “the body is formless and indeterminate, and this indeterminacy renders it both spontaneous and dispossessed in relation to the changing environment.”⁴³ Zhuangzi's notion of the body encourages receptivity to the fluid, indeterminate spaces between entities. This philosophy reshapes how I conceptualise music notation. Each note is a transitional moment in a continuously transforming cycle or flow.

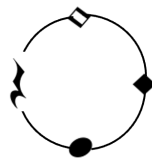


Diagram 2: interchangeable states of a note

⁴² Shan ben tu shu, 17.

⁴³ Peng Yu, “Indeterminate Self: Subjectivity, Body and Politics in Zhuangzi,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 46, no. 3 (2020): 344.

The diagram above shows the different stages of a note played on a string instrument, from full presence to half pressure, harmonic pressure, then to silence, forming a cycle. “ • ” indicates “human” (人). The full-bodied sound anchors the music in a tangible quality. “ ♦ ” and “ ◊ ” correspond to the "..." stage. They evoke in-between timbral states. These sounds shimmer and flow like a fish's tail in water, capturing the essence of constant motion and transition. “ ʃ ” symbolises silence. It embodies unity, oneness (一). It represents a space where all elements – sound, silence, human, and fish – are interconnected.

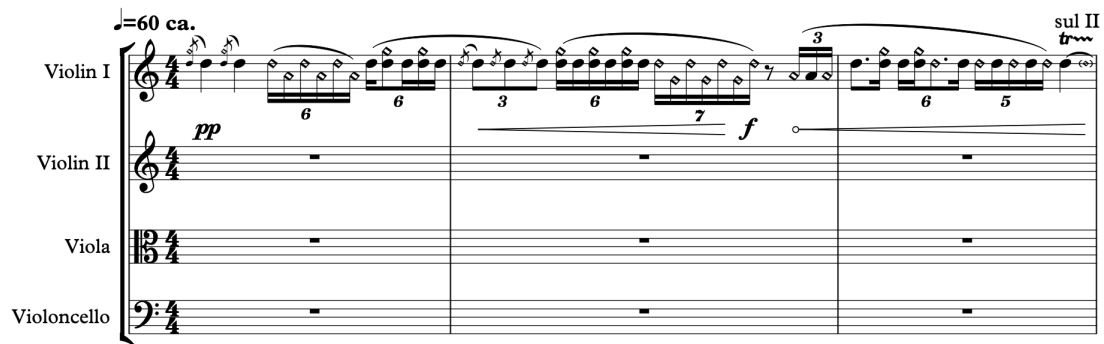


Figure 12: *Not Fish*, opening measures

Zhuangzi compares the body to water that is “bound by other things that permeate it” and the body “as a site that generates change and relation”⁴⁴. Figure 12 shows how bodies of sounds can be volatile and open to change and unsettlement. I used to think of a “note” as a basic, discrete unit of music, a sequence of dots progressing linearly, each connected by externally imposed rules of harmony and rhythm. Inspired by Zhuangzi, I now think of connection as an intrinsic mode of change itself. The fundamental unit of music is no longer isolated notes but the transitions that blur their boundaries, creating a permeable surface where sounds interact. In figure 12, while a note may hold a stable

⁴⁴ Yu, 345.

pitch name, it constantly shifts between full presence and transparency. Each note exists in relation to those preceding and following it, embodying an ongoing process of becoming and the permeable surfaces that connect them.

5.2.1 Mode of Tenuousness

Zhuangzi links the spontaneity of the body with “a mode of tenuousness”. To “become tenuous” is to engage in a process of self-discarding, opening oneself to possibilities and experiencing a state of “being here but not here”.⁴⁵ In his cosmos, the process of making the self tenuous liberates the body from its pre-assumed human conditions.⁴⁶ In the quartet, the string embodies this idea through sounds that are volatile and in an in-between state. The volatility reflects Zhuangzi's 'mode of tenuousness.' It also resonates with the "ㄣ" stage of the pictogram, symbolising movement and transformation. Sound is fleeting, a manifestation of motion and in-betweenness.

⁴⁵ Yiou Penelope Peng, “I AM (VR): Tenuous Self (虛我) and the Liminal Body in Virtual Reality,” *Body, Space & Technology Journal* 21, no. 1 (2022): 6, <https://doi.org/10.16995/bst.7975>.

⁴⁶ Peng, 6.

Figure 13: mm 13-19, *Not Fish*

The passage from mm13-17 (figure 13) unfolds in multiple overlapping layers, oscillating between full resonance and harmonics, stasis and motion, and extremes in dynamics (from *ppp* to *fff*). At measure 13, the viola and cello explore the transformation between C# and F# through four distinct approaches: alternating between full pressure and touch-fourth harmonics, dividing the interval into a half-harmonic pentatonic scale, employing unstable tremolos, and executing a glissando that traces the fluid process between the pitches.

Tenuousness here is not merely about delicacy or fragility—it speaks to impermanence, an existence defined by flux. The textural ambiguity creates the impression of pitches hovering, always in transition, never fully anchored. What makes the C#-F# transformation liminal is that the passage neither resolves into one pitch nor abandons the relationship between the two. Even the quasi-arrival point at measure 18

resolves not into stability but into silence—an arrival that is, paradoxically, a dissolution. Sounds emerge from rapid, lively gestures only to dissolve into the edge of perception, like a fish sensed but never fully seen. The sense of impermanence and transition forms the core of Zhuangzi’s “mode of tenuousness”.

5.3 The Invisibility of the Body: Oneness

Repeat 7 times in own pace.

Gradually move from *forte* to silence from *ord.* to *sul pont.*

Air bow for the last two times. tempo *ad lib.*

Figure 14: *Not Fish Ending*

The ending of the string quartet (see figure 14) evokes a transformation, as the music gradually fades, and the performers transition into silence. The musicians “air-bow” the instruments, moving their bows across the strings without producing sound. The silent bowing shows motion without the expected auditory result and manifests a transition from the audible to the inaudible. Sound becomes invisible underneath a visible gestural trance. As the performers continue to air-bow, there remains a subtle self-presence in their movement. The audience, having internalised the musical patterns from previous repetitions, can still “hear” the notes in their minds, creating a hauntingly uncanny experience.

The absence of sound introduces a dissonance between what is seen and what is heard, evoking a sensation of emptiness or spectral presence. The memory of sound

lingers, but its physical reality is lost. While the musicians' left hands continue to articulate pitches on the fingerboard, the sounds have become imperceptible. This silence in a sense dismantles the usual relationship between the perceiver and the perceived and dissolves the direct feedback that sound usually provides. The transition from traditional bowing to air-bowing through *sul ponticello* toward complete silence represents a gesture of self-transcendence—a relinquishing of sound that mirrors a body transcending its own limits.

In this final transformation, silence becomes its own kind of presence—felt rather than heard. The music lingers, not in the air, but in the minds of the audience. This quiet disappearance reflects Zhuangzi's idea of *wuwei*: “renouncing the possession of the body and leaving the body to seek its way of becoming”, “a body without a body”.⁴⁷ The quartet closes with a sense of impermanence, where the music transcends its physical form and becomes something more fragile and fleeting.

⁴⁷ Yu, “Indeterminate Self,” 346.

6 The Lullaby

The Lullaby is a chamber opera in four scenes presenting an eerie, subversive fairy-tale that shifts between reality and a nightmarish dreamscape. The plot revolves around a lullaby that works in reverse, sending the character of Mother into a nightmare where she encounters her shadow in the form of a serpent. The serpent confronts her with a dark, unspoken wish she holds involving her children, June and Scout.

The Lullaby was composed as part of a collaborative project featuring four new operas created by postgraduate students from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music (SCM), each exploring themes related to mothers and motherhood. This production brought together composers from SCM and librettists from the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) Masters Writing program, developed under the guidance of opera director Lindy Hume and dramaturg Sally Blackwood. The chamber orchestra for the production was the SCM Contemporary Music Ensemble, which was featured onstage as part of the scenic environment.

The twelve-month project started with my collaboration with writers Lily Thomson and Kirrily Annalise. We began without any pre-conceived themes on human/more-than-human relationships. Early development focused on informal, immersive exercises, such as improvisational writing on themes of “mother” and “mothering” during outdoor picnics. This process evolved into “musicalizing” the text through spoken, chanted, and fragmented sounds in spontaneous exploratory ways, alongside environmental sounds like rustling leaves and birdsong.

Unexpectedly, a profound realisation emerged: the concept of human/more-than-human entanglement did not need to be intentionally pursued, as these interconnections already permeate our experiences. This aligns with Stacy Alaimo’s argument that the

material world is not a passive backdrop to human activity but rather an active participant in shaping our lives.⁴⁸ More-than-human entities—animals, plants, rocks—possess their own agency and capacities to influence and interact with humans. The material world is agentic.⁴⁹ This opera project allowed me to further evolve my ideas about how diverse bodies—whether human or more-than-human—actively shape environments and relationships, each contributing uniquely to the collaborative process.

6.1 Trans-Corporeality

Trans-corporeality is a concept developed by Stacy Alaimo in the book *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. “Trans indicates movement across different sites”,⁵⁰ and trans-corporeality acknowledges the continuity between bodies and places, facilitating “transit across traditional disciplinary boundaries”.⁵¹ In the spirit of trans-corporeality, *The Lullaby* employs a range of motifs and staging devices to dissolve distinctions between human and more-than-human realms.

The image shows a musical score for a piano reduction of an aria. The top staff is for the voice, labeled 'Mother', and the bottom staff is for the piano, labeled 'Pno.'. The score covers measures 87 to 94. The vocal line has lyrics: '— a ghas-ty view', 'A ser - pent lay a - cross the floor.', 'Big, fat, and slee ping Big,'. The piano accompaniment features complex textures with triplets and various dynamic markings including *mp*, *p*, *mf*, and *fff*. There are also markings for *ob.* (oboe) and *mf* in the piano part.

Figure 15: mm 87-94, Mother’s Aria, piano reduction, *The Lullaby*

The first layer of trans-corporality unfolds through the physical movements in the opera production, where human bodies morph into animal states. For instance, in

⁴⁸ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, 1st ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010, 2.

⁴⁹ Alaimo, 2.

⁵⁰ Alaimo, 2.

⁵¹ Alaimo, 11.

Mother's aria (mm 55-112, see figure 15), she embodies a snake-like quality as she crawls across the floor, mimicking the slithering motion of a serpent. Mother follows an invisible presence, visualising the snake as "laying across the floor, big, fat, and sleeping". The moment exemplifies a sensory discord. Mother visualises snakes that are not tactile and hears something that is not visually present. The interplay of sensory gaps creates a space where human and snakes coexist, where Mother embodies features of an invisible serpent.

[illegible]

Figure 16: Children's Improvisation, B1-B2, Scene 1, *The Lullaby*

Figure 16 illustrates the graphic notation⁵² for the children’s improvisation which embodies a kaleidoscope of more-than-human behaviours: animalistic, mechanical and fictional. The two singers adopt both the sonic and physical gestures of a variety of beings: a mosquito’s buzzing, a chicken’s clucking, a goat’s bleating, a kettle boiling, and the antics of a cat cartoon character. The enactments are not only imitative performances from the visuals. During rehearsals, we reimagined the siblings’ playful interactions through the lens of animal behaviours. Their sibling rivalry took the form of two chickens flapping their wings, competing in both volume and the speed of their movements. When June rocked Scout too violently in the shopping cart, Scout responded with the impatient and urgent bleating of a goat. The climax of the children’s improvisation is when they point to the sky and sing in a responsive way to the “shooting stars”. Even in the absence of any visual indication of stars on stage, the children’s multi-sensory improvisations convey co-existence and interaction with stars.



Figure 17: Photo of children throwing “flowers”, Scene 2, photo © Jacquie Manning

⁵² Cathy Berberian’s *Stripsody* (1966) serves as a key reference point for the notation used in *The Lullaby*. In *Stripsody*, Berberian’s comic-strip-style graphics and onomatopoeic syllables encourage a playful and theatrical interpretation. Both her piece and mine encourage the performer to interpret the visuals through vocal expressions.

The discrepancy between visuals and text further develops in the second scene. In *The Game* (measure 161-178), the singers present “frogs,” “snails,” and “moths’ wings,” yet the objects they hold do not match these labels, blending trash with animals in a surreal, childlike manner (see figure 17). This tension culminates as they rip up discarded magazines, throw the pieces into the air, and shout “flowers.” The moment evokes a whimsical and fantastical quality, where man-made debris is perceived as organic, animate beings.

Music deepens this trans-corporeal experience by layering contrasting sounds with the children’s declarations, creating a multi-sensory tapestry that resists straightforward interpretation. The “snail” is accompanied by a rubber chicken sound, while the “flowers” resonate with a metallic mark tree glissando. This sonic divergence alongside visual elements intensifies the dreamlike quality, where each sensory field points in different directions, blending the real and imagined. The theme of “dreaming” naturalises these sensory and conceptual contradictions, allowing boundaries between worlds to blur.

The opera’s climax sees Mother wielding a clothes hanger as a “sword” to defeat the nightmare. Outside of Mother’s dream, the children offer her “a sword of purest silver” after witnessing her cry within the nightmare. The “magic” of theatre lies in the way a domestic utility object can transform into something fantastical. The clothes hanger embodies the fluid interplay between the imagination and materiality. As an object found by children in the exterior of Mother’s dreamscape, the clothes hanger acts as a “weapon” inside Mother’s nightmare. The clothes hanger becomes more than a tool—it becomes a symbolic extension of Mother’s resilience and her confrontation with fear. This dual role of the hanger, as both a real-world object and a dreamscape

artifact, highlights the porous boundaries between reality and imagination, and between external environments and internal struggles.

In *The Lullaby*, reality and fantasy intertwine, creating a rich tapestry where trash, animals, daily objects, and human bodies all possess agency. Even the most ordinary items carry the weight of transformation and possibility, suggesting that the mundane can be a site of power and connection.

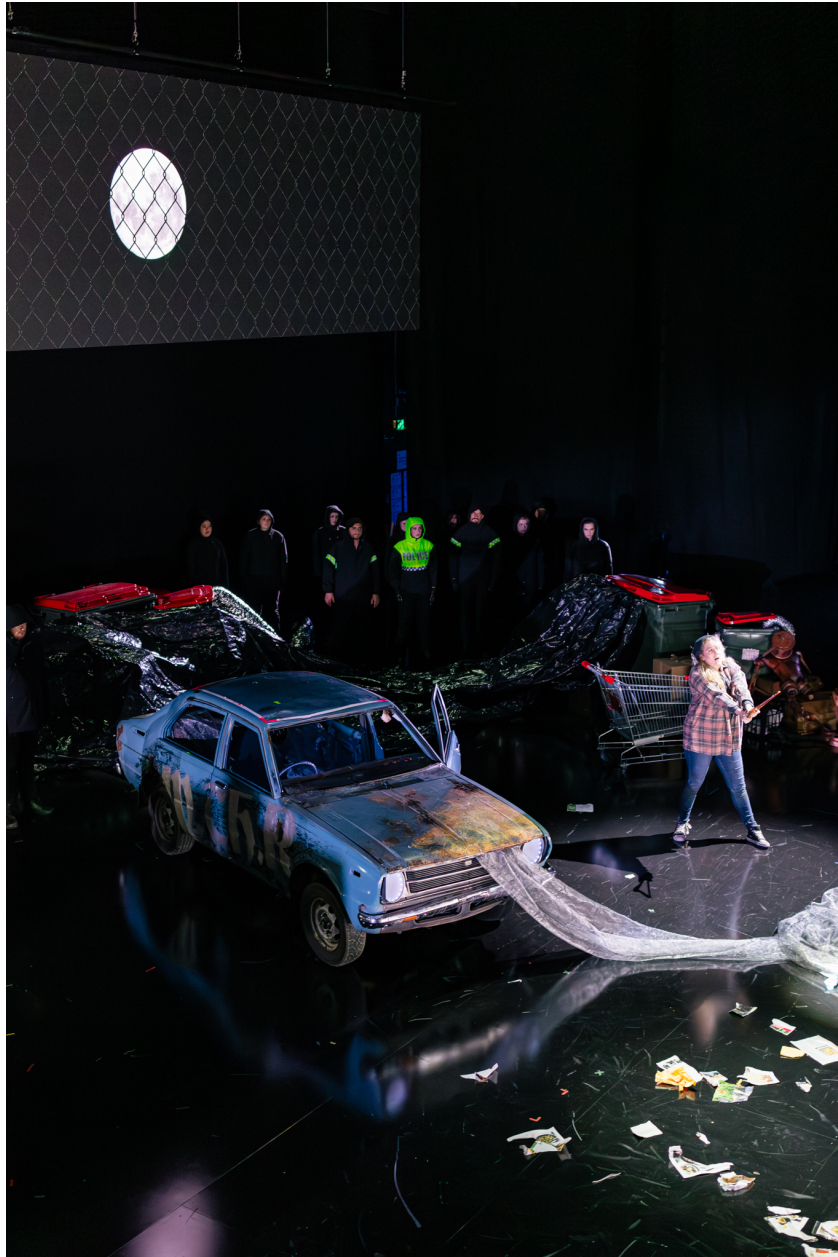


Figure 18: Mother wields the clothes hanger/sword, Scene 4, photo © Jacquie Manning

6.1.1 Snake, Environment, Subjectivity



Figure 19: Snakes cocoon Mother, Scene 3, photo © Jacquie Manning

In *The Lullaby*, the environment operates as an external manifestation of Mother's internal world, reflecting her mentality in ways that are emergent and tactile. Mother's fears and desires merge with the material world, embodying the concept of trans-corporeality. As Alaimo says, the "Human body is never a rigidly enclosed, protected entity, but is vulnerable to the substances and flows of its environments."⁵³ This reciprocity works in both directions, as Mother's internal struggles spill into the external stage space, shaping and being shaped by it.

Mother's desires, coupled with guilt and internal conflict, materialise as snake-like entities—Mother's "shadow self." The snakes manifest in fluid, omnipresent forms (see figure 19) on stage and through sounds. Initially embodied as eerie hissing sounds that

⁵³ Alaimo, 29.

infiltrate the atmosphere, the snakes later take on physical forms: a billowing black plastic sheet, a shimmering golden fabric resembling snakeskin. An abandoned car becomes an alternative body for the snake with the headlights as eyes, a hood as a mouth, and silver fabric as a tongue. The snakes' presence extends beyond objects to human form, with three singers collectively embodying the serpentine figures. The stage is encircled by corrugated aluminum tubes, mimicking coiled, winding snakes that seem to pulse and shift. These manifestations are not merely projections of Mother's fears—they act as active agents, intensifying her psychological confinement and entanglement.

The stage itself becomes an elastic, transformative space where the boundaries between dreaming and waking dissolve. The snakes weave through this elastic space, threading together reality and nightmare. Mother's desires and fears are rendered both intimate and public, as the snakes situate her unspoken wish for her children's absence in a space beyond the societal expectation of the "caring, loving" maternal figure. The snakes are not intangible spectres; they are visceral, tangible entities that invade and entangle with Mother's body. The snakes amplify her fears and desires into a synthetic environment that she both imagines and inhabits.

The stage thus becomes a space of inter-articulated realities, constructed through the dynamic interactions between the characters, the environment, and the material world. It resists being a static or isolated backdrop; instead, it shapes the narrative through its fluid and tactile presence. The overlapping stage settings evoke a sense of disorientation, yet the junkyard-like environment remains phenomenally logical and grounds the audience in its familiarity.

The interconnected relationship among subjectivity, space, and snakes asks for a reading strategy that looks not for causality or resolution, but for multiplicity and

ambiguity across the boundary between reality and dreams, humans and more-than-human. Mother's desire is fluid, moving through her body and into the environment. It manifests in the form of snakes which transform the space into destabilisation and dreamlike ambiguity.

6.2 Incorporating the More-Than-Human as a process

The staging helps us navigate the permeability between the human emotions and more-than-human agency. I take a further step in integrating the musical structure and performance techniques with the dynamics of more-than-human entities.

6.2.1.1 Structure and the Sun

The opera delves into the theme of awakening—both literal and metaphorical—as the mother confronts her repressed emotions and learns to navigate the complexities of her own mind. *The Lullaby* is structured around the cyclical processes of sleeping and waking, drawing inspiration from the etymology of the Chinese character for "dream" (夢). The character integrates the radicals for "roof" (宀) and "sun at dusk" (夕). It evokes the perception of light transitioning into a shadowy, liminal space. These semantic and visual components align with the opera's exploration of the dream state as a recurring and continuous phenomenon.



Figure 20: "sun sequence"

This etymological resonance is reflected in the harmonic architecture of the opera. Figure 20 shows a sequence of chords that I call the "sun sequence." This sequence operates as a sonic metaphor for the sleeping-waking cycle, gradually transitioning from bright, open harmonies to darker, more enclosed tonalities. The "sun sequence" functions as a structural and thematic motif throughout the opera and serves as a sonic signifier of the dream cycle. Its recursive nature reveals the act of dreaming into an embodied, continuous state of being and echos the natural rhythms of breath and growth. Just as the etymology of the character *meng* (夢) underscores the interplay between enclosure, dimness, and transformation, the "sun sequence" in the opera similarly embodies the reciprocity between light and shadow, waking and dreaming.

6.2.1.2 Harmony And Snakes

Figure 21 illustrates the blending of the sun harmonies with the slithering, oozing movement of snakes. I conceptualise contours of lines as animate beings with purpose, direction, and intent. The winding lines serve a dual purpose: they function as transposed "sun chords," transitioning from bright to dim hues to signify Mother's descent into her dream, while also appearing as chromatic interjections that represent the snakes' invasive presence.

The fusion of sun harmonies with chromaticism creates a new sonic landscape, mirroring the intertwined nature of Mother's dreams and fears, embodied in both the music and the snake imagery.

190

Fl. *mp* *p* *f*

Ob. *mp* *p* *f*

Cl. *mp* *p* *f*

Bari. Sax. *mp* *p* *f* *pp*

Bsn. *mp* *p* *f* *pp*

Hrn. *senza sord.* *mp* *p* *f*

Tpt. *mp* *p* *f*

Tbn. *mp* *p* *f* *pp*

Perc. I *mp* *p* *f*

Perc. II *mp* *p* *f*

Pno. *mp* *p* *f*

Mother

June *innocent, light*
[singing] [a] [i] [a]
May be it will eat her sleep a-way?

Scout *curious, ecstatic*
[singing] [i] [a] [i]
The skin of a ser-pent

SK 1 *mp*

SK 2

SK 3

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc. *ff* *mf*

Db. *ff* *mf*

Temp.
with plastic, rub the surface of the temp. in circular motion

Rain Stick

Figure 21: Sun Chords with Snakes, Scene 2

6.2.1.3 Air

[illegible]

Figure 22: Breathing in and out, mm 239-249, Winds, Scene 3

Figure 22 illustrates how Mother and her surroundings breathe together as one. The wind performers inhale and exhale in a reciprocal dialogue with Mother's confessional lines. The act of synchronised collective breathing from bar 239-249 transforms Mother's confession into a ritual of integration. In the third scene, Mother, unable to bear the emotional pressure, finally admits her need for space to express her voice. The wind players breathe in and out into through mouthpieces without producing any pitch. This sonic texture evokes the illusion of Mother releasing her tension, as if her emotional burden is momentarily dissipating into the vastness of the surrounding air.

The sound of breath holds a spatial quality. Right after Mother's line "I crave space to speak", the collective breath evokes a sense of openness, mirroring the expansive quality of wind, and resonating with Mother's inner state.

As breath connects the performers, it becomes more than sound; it becomes a gesture of shared existence. The space and objects onstage are no longer passive—they are alive, engaging with Mother in a reciprocal exchange. The audience, too, is potentially drawn into this interaction, immersed in a shared experience of space, emotion, and materiality.

This moment is not only a personal confession for Mother but also a release that extends outward, creating a sense of connection and shared being. It dissolves the boundary between emotions and materiality, allowing the act of breathing to embody a communal rhythm, where the visible and invisible, the vocal and instrumental, the individual and collective, coexist.

6.3 Reflection on *The Lullaby*

My understanding of opera has shifted: it is more than writing melodies and orchestration; it is in a sense a highly intertwined and fully living artform. Human performers, objects, sounds, and even the space itself act as agents in the unfolding narrative. These elements form a system of interdependencies—none are mere symbols or props but active participants. Opera and theatre have always had the potential to reimagine banal objects, inviting us to see them in ways that escape the limits of everyday perception.⁵⁴

In *The Lullaby*, this vision takes shape as Mother reclaims a space where the perpetual recurrence of her fears is allowed to exist—a space that doesn't resolve or diminish but evolves. The opera creates an interplay of meanings where internal emotions and external environments bleed into one another, blurring boundaries and opening new ways of understanding. The growth and decay of dream states drift through the performance space. Opera, in this way, can push the limits of what is living and breathing, not through rigid representations but through sensory disorientation and overlapping fields of perception. As a multi-sensory artform, opera has the potential to not only tell stories but to integrate the tangled, interconnected nature of existence itself.

Composing is thus a process of a co-creation—a way of inhabiting the rhythms of the world, where music becomes part of the perpetual becoming of all living things. The

⁵⁴ Some examples from recent music-theatre include Ashley Fure's *The Force of Things: An Opera for Objects* (2017), Tan Dun's *Tea: A Mirror of Soul* (2002). Tan used elements of the Japanese and Chinese tea ceremonies (water, fire, paper, and ceramic) to tell a tragic love story. In Fure's opera, she invited audiences to engage with the material world and confront the imperceptible forces that shape our environment.

formal features of music—structures of harmony, of melodic contours, timbral transformations and gestural shapes—can live like animals, plants, or natural beings. In *The Lullaby*, harmony radiates like sunlight, shifting between brightness and shadow; melodic lines slither like snakes, winding with intent; glissandi beam and shimmer like light, fluid and unbound. Composing becomes an act of re-living—the lives of the sun, the snakes, the breath of wind.

7 Conclusion

This thesis is structured around four composition projects, each offering a particular lens to explore the theme of reciprocity between humans and the more-than-human world. *Three Haiku* examines impermanence and relationality through intimate interactions between performers, listeners, and natural elements, while *The Sea* dissolves the boundaries of self through improvisation that embodies the fluidity of oceanic motion and sound. In *Not Fish*, the abstraction of pictographs inspires a musical language that blurs distinctions between human and fish, invoking Zhuangzi's philosophy of tenuousness and spontaneous transformation. Finally, *The Lullaby* integrates sound, movement, and staging to create a trans-corporeal narrative where Mother's internal struggles merge with her environment, reflecting an interplay of fear, desire, and material agency. Together, these chapters illuminate how music-making can serve as a practice of mutual becoming, creating a space where human and more-than-human entities coalesce in a shared process of emergence and transformation.

Japanese philosopher Kitaro said: "Nothing exists that isn't connected. But connectedness doesn't exist. It shows itself through things that are connected, but connectedness itself doesn't exist. You can't point to it. So, which is more fundamental? Connected things, or connectedness? Connectedness is more fundamental."⁵⁵

"Connectedness" itself is not a tangible entity. It is not something we can isolate or define; it is an abstract quality that emerges through relationships. Composing, for me, is not just about making connections but embodying connectedness itself—a force that cannot be seen, only felt, emerging through the interplay of sound, space, and time.

⁵⁵ Thomas Kasulis, "Japanese Philosophy," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/japanese-philosophy/>. 6.

It is within this web of relationships that I find myself. As Tim Ingold says, “To correspond with the world is not to describe it, or to represent it, but to *answer* it.”⁵⁶ Composing is not about assembling pieces but about becoming entwined in the process, letting the connectedness of things guide both the work and me. It is not the act of shaping a finished form, but of allowing something alive to emerge, where the invisible threads of connection reveal themselves through sound. Composing doesn’t saturate the world with meaning or signification; instead, it creates a co-presence—a shared moment of the continuous now with living and non-living entities alike. Composing is a way of connecting “I” with a world that is, as Abram says, “textured presence, filled with invisible but nonetheless tactile, olfactory, and audible influences”.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ingold, *Making*, 108.

⁵⁷ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 26.

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