

Operatic Silences: On Labour and Listening

Lina Lapelytė, Reece Cox

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Transcript

Reece Cox Greetings and welcome to another episode of INFO Unltd.

[flutes play in the background]

My name is Reece Cox and today's episode is part of a series made in collaboration with Nottingham Contemporary and INFO Unltd right here on Cashmere Radio. Cashmere Radio is a not-for-profit community experimental radio station based in Lichtenberg, Berlin whose ambition is to preserve and further broadcasting practices through play and proliferation of the radio medium. On today's programme, I'll be speaking with, and sharing works from artist, musician and composer, Lina Lapelytė. Lina's work includes such notable collaborations as *Have a good day!* (2013), *Candy Shop* (2015), and *Sun and Sea* (2017), the latter, you may recall represented the

Lithuanian pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale, and was the recipient of the Golden Lion award. Her works have been shown at the MACBA – Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art; Cartier Foundation, Paris; Queen Elizabeth Hall, London; and David Roberts Art Foundation, London, and many other excellent venues. To me, in Lina's collaborative and solo work, I'm struck by the way that music and performance are used to create situations which lend themselves towards a sculptural way of thinking. While the work is always music, or contains musical elements; music, musicians and scores become material capable of speaking towards issues and topics beyond themselves, whether that might be about a particular history, material, or simply the everyday.

[Chorus of bass voices plays in the background]

A great example of this is in the recording that you're hearing right now just under my voice from a performance called *Hunky Bluff* (2014), which took place in Serpentine galleries, London. Before we discuss this piece, I first wanted to speak with Lina about her background and how she arrived at such a particular practice. Let's go to the interview.

Lina Lapelytė: I grew up spending a lot of time with my mother who sang in amateur choirs. All my childhood, I was surrounded by music but never thought much of it. As I grew up, I did not know what being a professional musician was, but I quickly realised that being a performer or interpreter doesn't allow for the amount of freedom that I wanted to have in making things. I always saw music as a medium beyond the score and beyond listening. For me it was always about how you experience it. I think a lot of my projects went into the direction where music is used as a tool, but it's not the main element.

RC: When I think about your practice, working with music and performance as a way to create

something beyond themselves, the first piece that comes to mind and the first piece that I would like to discuss is *Hunky Bluff* (2014), which was performed at the Serpentine Galleries in London in 2014. In this piece, you built an opera which draws from the history and tradition of the *castrati*. Before we talk about the piece itself, I'd like to first ask if you could give a bit of context to who the *castrati* were.

LL: *Castrati* singers were called male sopranos who had been castrated in puberty to preserve their high-pitched voices. They were the pop stars of the eighteenth century. Towards the end of nineteenth century, this practice was forbidden. But before then, it was used quite widely. A lot of composers – almost all composers – would have a part for *castrati* in their operas. Their high-pitched male voice is different from *false alto* as the process of castration would impact the entire body formation and lead to atypically enlarged lungs. So, it was not just the high-pitched voice, it was also the strength of their voice that was very particular.

RC: The history of preserving the high pitch of young male voices by castration can be traced all the way back to the Byzantine Empire. But it wasn't until the mid-sixteenth century, or over 1000 years later, that the *castrati* tradition became common in Europe, specifically in Italy. *Castrati* could be found singing in the most esteemed venues such as the Sistine Chapel. And virtually every popular opera could be expected to feature a *castrato* in a lead role. However, in 1861, after the unification of Italy, the practice was outlawed completely. But at least one *castrato* survived long enough to see the emergence of recording technology. His name was Alessandro Moreschi, and this is the sound of him singing Ave Maria in 1902.

[Alessandro Moreschi singing Ave Maria]

In your work, *Hunky Bluff*, you have staged a kind of reversal, where instead of having men

with surgically induced high voices, there are women with particularly deep voices. And I am curious what you are interested in speaking to with this reversal?

LL: My interest or the starting point of this piece was knowing some women who have super deep voices, which I was always fascinated by. I was looking back into this classical division between male and female voices, and it would happen that some voices would not fit into what is considered normal. Some women have low voices, which is absolutely fine, you know [laughs]. However, in the choirs I have experienced, there was some uneasiness with the low female voice: for female voices to sing male parts was not easily acceptable in some choirs or by some conductors. I became interested in the gendered voice in opera and began listening to how the high-pitched arias sounded like they were performed by female voices, but actually they were performed by men. In this piece, I tried to explore the opposite.

[*Hunky Bluff* plays]

I wanted to work with a group of women. It was a lot about being together and doing things together. The arias are taken from famous operas, usually performed in Italian, which I translated to English. So, all the magic that was in the Italian arias performed by the beautiful *castrati* voices was somewhat destroyed in this piece, because this group of women with very low voices sounded like a drunk fishermen choir performing arias that are meant to be extremely beautiful and about love and longing. Sometimes they were also talking about loneliness and not being able to cope with the world. It all kind of came together in this strange act.

RC: And as for the performance itself, it took place in a unique venue within the Serpentine Galleries – in a temporary pavilion. I'm wondering if the piece was produced

specifically to address this space?

LL: Yes, it was. It was performed at the Smiljan Radic Pavilion at Serpentine. They have a different pavilion there every summer. When I was invited to make a piece for Park Nights, curated by Lucia Pietroiusti, I already knew what kind of space would be there, so the choreographical elements of the piece – the way it looked – was site-specific to the Pavilion. Different architectures allow for certain things to happen and I quite like to respond to it and collaborate with the architects and their spatial visions.

RC: And the architecture of this particular pavilion made for unusual performance in the context of opera, with half the audience looking down from a balcony and the other at eye level. This is another kind of reversal or departure from the regular presentation of an opera in that there was actually no stage for the performers to stand on.

LL: Yes, I remember this funny moment when I realised that *Hunky Bluff* had been advertised as a classical music and opera event [laughs]. It was a headache for me to think ‘oh my god all these classical music lovers will come and will be so disappointed because this is actually not an opera.’ You know, the piece is not doing what an opera does, it is very subtle and it’s not directly ironic or performing gender roles. It’s in between being a musical, a choir performance, and a take on gender but in a very subtle way.

[*Hunky Bluff* plays]

RC: So now I’d like to speak about *Have a good day!* (2013), which you worked on as a composer. It was first premiered in 2013, and has toured many times since then, all the way up until this year. And this piece is also an opera but unlike *Hunky Bluff*, the performers are in character as grocery store clerks. And the songs they sing are about the sort of day to day

of their lives and work. And I’m curious how you arrived at this particular setting and what is perhaps being spoken to by giving a voice to this particular character.

LL: This piece is a collaboration between me, the writer Vaiva Grainytė, and the filmmaker, Rugile Barzdžiukaitė. *Have a good day!* happened after a period of time when I was involved in the experimental music, noise, and electronic music scenes, and realised I wanted to work with voice. Vaiva Grainytė, who wrote the text for *Have a good day!* and I went on a short residency where we explored what could be the subject for an opera work. Her friend suggested, ‘why don’t you look into something simple and mundane?’, and he recounted a scenario in the supermarket where the cashier was complaining that she could not go to the loo or something quite dramatic along these lines. Somehow, we started to build this worldview of the supermarket and of the daily products we all buy, and realised that the piece, although it looks to the supermarket cashier is actually about each of us, about the cycles of buying and selling. The cashiers wait for pay day, and then when they get paid, they go off and buy what everyone else has bought from them. It’s a never-ending circle.

[*Have a good day!* plays]

This mundane social aspect was a collective effort and vision that the three of us came up with. And I think it also had quite a big impact on our individual works.

RC: In what way?

LL: For me, for example, *Have a good day!* was the first time I really dared to work with a group of people. It was a challenge for myself to also sing. Before then I was quite shy to sing in public. And for this opera, I had to teach the singers to perform the arias I had written, because I wanted them to sound in a very particular way. There was no way that I could

do this without showing it myself. The piece brought me to do certain things that then became quite important for my own practice. After that work, I became much more open to use my voice in my works.

RC: Are you actually performing in this piece when it is presented live?

LL: No. Well, actually I do play a bit of electronics. There are two or three minutes of noise in the work and I also perform the beeps of the supermarket [laughs]. The cashiers – each singer has a little scanner that produces a beep into a particular tone, and that is the tone for the whole opera. They tune into this.

[*Have a good day!* plays]

In my own practice and also in the collaboration with Vaiva and Rugile, we try to avoid being didactic, especially when we talk about difficult topics. We do not want to say that something is good or bad, because we all belong to the same world and we behave in similar ways, so we cannot really pass a judgemental view on things.

[*Have a good day!* plays]

RC: Following *Have a good day!*, Lina and her collaborators Rugile Barzdžiukaitė and Vaiva Grainytė came together again to make a work entitled *Sun and Sea* which also utilises a familiar setting as a scene of an opera. Instead of cashiers at grocery stores singing about their daily lives and work, we find a sunny beach full of beach goers of all ages sunbathing and lazing about on towels and folding chairs. A scene which would be familiar to anyone who's been to a tourist filled public beach of just about any popular vacation destination. Similarly to *Hunky Bluff*, which we discussed at the beginning of this episode, the audience watches from a mezzanine encircling the beach below. The beach is on the ground floor of an industrial building, covered in sand and lit with

bright lighting to emulate the sun. There's no water on this beach, just the implication that it probably exists somewhere at the end of this expanse of sun and sunbathers. The performers dressed as beach goers take turns singing individually and as a choir in an operatic fashion about the goings on of their day in the sun, belting out inner monologues for all to hear. *Sun and Sea* was first realised in Lithuania and later went on to represent the Lithuanian pavilion in the 2019 Venice Biennale, where it was selected for the highest award of the Golden Lion. Since then, the piece has been realised in a number of locations, and before COVID-19 was scheduled for a 2020 world tour. Although the tour has been postponed, it is scheduled to be presented this May at E-Werk Luckenwalde in Berlin.

LL: Yes, the work is set on a sandy beach. You enter an industrial space, climb up the stairways, hear someone singing, and look through a balcony or mezzanine. You then see a brightly lit beach where performers rest on their backs and sing. You hear occasional dogs barking and kids shouting in a kind of a *tableaux vivant* that is staged as an opera and where singers perform their stories as arias.

[*Sun and Sea* plays]

RC: You may remember a few moments ago Lina mentioning that she was not particularly interested in making work which is didactic. But during and after the Venice Biennale, the piece was portrayed as an important address of the climate crisis. I wanted to speak with Lina about whether this was a concern from the beginning or something which later came into the fold.

LL: The way the opera was mediated after the Venice Biennial relates it to climate change. We thought about it when we were working on the piece, but, for us, it explores deeper what we already started with *Have a good day!*. The consumerism that is performed in *Sun and Sea*

is a logical next step to the supermarket script. The work draws a parallel between an exhausted planet Earth and a fatigued human being who keeps gruelling the Earth while wearing him or herself down at the same time.

[*Sun and Sea* plays]

RC: And how was it that a conversation about human and planetary exhaustion and consumption led to the development of such a sort of peaceful and serene situation that we find on the beach of *Sun and Sea*?

LL: For us the beach scenario came before we knew what the beach goers would talk about. The topics emerged naturally, because the beach allowed for a social situation where different groups of people mix or co-enjoy the sun. It was a good situation to turn our minds to. Climate change came in later in the process.

RC: Was it a surprise to you that it was talked about so much as being a piece about climate change?

LL: It was. When we first showed it in Lithuania in 2017, in its Lithuanian version, it was not perceived as a climate change opera. We were quite conscious about not making the latter very obvious in the piece. If you would not know that it is an opera on the climate crisis, you may not necessarily read it as such, or it might take you a while to actually get there. In Venice, however, it was immediately perceived as a work on climate change. We were slightly disappointed that people arrived already knowing what they were supposed to perceive from it. It is nice when the work does different things to different people.

[*Sun and Sea* plays]

At the same time, we felt that if the work was able to reach out to wider audiences and shift people's perceptions that would be an amazing thing. We are concerned about these issues and

the work communicated this message. In Venice, we were fascinated when environmental lawyers or politicians would come and see the piece. It was really important to us. But if you ask us if this is a topic we plan to work with in the future, I do not believe this is the kind of frame we want to stay with. One reason being, of course, is that climate change is a complex issue.

[*Sun and Sea* continues]

Performers, particularly in *Sun and Sea*, have an important role in our work. When we knew the subjects we were going to work with and how everything was going to look like, we called for an audition. The casting influenced the content of the work – narratives formed from meeting with the singers and musicians and emerged as part of this process. This is how the piece was built.

[*Sun and Sea* continues]

RC: I would like to discuss just one more piece before we go, which is entitled *Ladies* from 2015. This one strikes me as different from the others in that performers are not acting out a script or score as much as sort of being presented as themselves. Can you talk about how this piece came about and who those performers are?

LL: Well, the piece began with a visit to an ensemble called *Lithuania*, which is a state funded ensemble with folk instruments, dancers and singers. We were looking for singers for the opera *Have a good day!* and it struck me that the horizontal harp players in the very back of the orchestra seemed as if they were doing some kind of office work or desk job. They were of course producing sound. This image stayed with me for a long time. When I was working on a group show called 'Double Bind' for Rupert Art Center in Vilnius, Lithuania, I invited the horizontal harp players, four ladies, to work with me. And they very happily agreed

to this. Again, like an experiment, I was interested in the endurance of their playing as well as their learned manners and behaviours. The musical material that we developed together was simple and very different from what they usually perform in the ensemble. It is a monotonous drone piece that lasts twenty minutes and is played by four ladies whose whole life has been linked with traditional folk via the *Lithuania* ensemble. They toured the world with the ensemble, performed and behaved like musicians. So, their manners, the kind of learned manners, of how they are on stage were transferred. I was fascinated with how they could maintain them while playing something so unfamiliar to them. But this you know, being a musician is also about being able to interpret a score. They said they really liked the drone music [laughs]. We talk about listening with them, being together and feel the material because there is no actual written score. What I was interested in was their synchronised hand action, which for me talks about female labour.

RC: Now to close this episode out, I would like to play just an excerpt of this 20-minute piece performed by four horizontal harp players of the National Song and Dance Ensemble Lithuania.

[*Ladies* plays]

You have been listening to conversation and works from Lina Lapelytė. The first piece we heard today was *Hunky Bluff*, followed by *Have a good day!*, *Sun and Sea*, produced in collaboration with Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė and Vaiva Grainytė. The final piece we just listened to was entitled *Ladies*. This episode is part of a series produced in collaboration with Nottingham Contemporary as a contribution to The Contemporary Journal and the Sonic Continuum series organised by Sofia Lemos. This episode will be transcribed and published at thecontemporaryjournal.org and as always,

you can find the complete list of show notes along with all previous episodes of INFO Unltd in the archive at cashmereradio.com/shows/info-unltd. I want to give a big thanks to Lina Lapelytė for joining me in this episode. I'd like to again mention that *Sun and Sea* is scheduled to be presented at E-Werk Luckenwalde in Berlin on May 1 of this year. This has been another episode of INFO Unltd. My name is Reece Cox – as always thank you all so much for listening and until next time.

[*Ladies* continues]

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