

Prolegomenon to . . .

AH!

Opera No-Opera

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Martine Bellen

(wordssoundssounds)

David Rosenboom

(soundssoundssounds)

Introduction

AH! is such an opera that is not an opera and is called an opera for our time. *AH!* is an offering for the betterment of humanity on Earth today. *AH!* is an environment for discovering. *AH!* is an immersive opportunity for illumination, a flight simulator for psychonauts. *AH!* is an opera.

Composer-performer, David Rosenboom, and poet-writer, Martine Bellen, developed an interactive, creative process that integrates sound and word composition in a new way, such that music and libretto are not separate, are not different, and one that works from the origins of both music and language, illuminating their power to both differentiate and to join human beings.

The inspiration, the “click” in being, leading us to persist in this idea emerged from the direct, tough, cutting, illusion-busting nature of the language in the *Diamond Sutra*. To invite a transformative experience into being and invite others into a framework that is elevating, empowering, evolutionary, and pointed at the situation of the world *now* was part of the point. Given our world, the word *opera* was inescapable.

On one level – the work is about language – about language’s power, language’s failure and its relationship to the world human condition. First, there is the failure of both language and mathematics to evoke a unified and consistent, background-independent imagination of the nature of the physical world, from either a reductionist or constructivist points of view. Related to this is the problem of how the language of prediction relates to the language of observation. We run headlong into the limiting walls of explanation and reason.

Second, there is the genesis differentiating – albeit co-creative differentiating – of linguistic units – origins of language – giving rise to tools for labeling what become fervent systems of attachment (i.e. belief systems). These tools become the bases for the articulation of ideologies, which further become the *language* bases for the articulation of conflicts, arising fundamentally from the emerging survival tactics of differentiated self-hood. (This assumes the self-nature of groups as well as individuals within groups. Group behavior is thought of as emergent phenomena.)

It may be useful to note that it is widely speculated by theorists now that language may arise from an underlying substrate recognized as originally, functionally musical.

Darwin hypothesized an intermediate evolutionary stage of human communication that resembles music more than language – at least with attendant syntax and abstract signatory meaning. Then, humans go on to parse more detailed, subtle, and complex modulations leading to syllables. This may be driven by the basic functionality of

physical relationships, perhaps, like rising modulations signaling “pragmatic” functions, such as requesting objects or attention, and falling modulations signaling “mathetic” functions such as labeling.

And *now*, we humans take language further still, out of the sonic, and into the purely visually symbolic. Some of our primary mental activities now couple graphic marks to thought units – mind-symbols taken outside of physical sound embodiments. And thus, a book can cause a war.

Third, the conundrums in mathematics among differentiation and the origin of *one*, integration and counting and *zero*, *number*, *numeracy* and *infinity*, are not resolved. Furthermore, some of the most complex models of nature in mathematical form – as aesthetically beautiful as they are – suffer from instabilities due to the problem of *approximation*. That is, you never know whether, if you could only compute a result to even just one more decimal place of accuracy, the whole thing might blow up or not. Still, mathematics depends on language more than it admits to make imaginable links between the abstract manipulation of symbols, the structure of thoughts, and palpable things in a proposed real world.

Fourth, a critical evolutionary hurdle for humans to overcome now is how to use those same tools, of language, symbols, utterances, music, etc., to nurture the ascendancy of empathy, altruism and the kind of self-consciousness permitting these tools to be used increasingly efficiently in activating the deep imagination of the experiences of others and the co-creative experience that is universally shared. Neither religion nor science may be applicable to the understanding needed. Still, practicality in alleviating suffering and participating in evolution is necessary.

As language emerged, it became possible to make symbolic references to internal systems and states of belief. This was different than the way prior conditions of domain specific minds framed gesture communication in interacting with individual and social survival needs. With symbolic language, co-evolving, ballooning, bubbling, thought-mind-body-emotion states could be referenced. The act of referencing further enabled the growth and evolution of these states. Then, it became possible to *attach*, to give palpable substance to such belief states/systems, to experience threat to a self merely by perceiving the existence of different belief states/systems in another. Thus, separation, self-boundary emphasis, anger, aggression, and destruction based merely on perceived differences in illusory belief states/systems followed. This seemed absolutely essential and justifiable for survival. But, belief states/systems are illusory. So, conflict arises from illusions symbolically referenced with language.

Our impulse towards such an idea as an *opera no-opera* inspired by the *Diamond Sūtra* is followed with a profound essential presence of the paradoxes of description. What

is the role of language in this? How might an invitation into the resulting experience nurture forward evolution? This must emerge from *co-creativity*. From a future point of whatever may result, the beginning point (*now*) may be indescribable. And from this genesis, any eventual manifestations are by definition indescribable. The usual path to an opera: find a subject, find a story, think of a musical concept, write the libretto, write the music, make a staging, bang, your done, doesn't seem to apply to this idea.

The *Diamond Sutra* cuts deep and fast. The rhythm, the cycles of expression with subtle changes that suddenly become profound shifts, the form: *A is no A, that's why it is called A*, which has incredibly malleable applicability while maintaining incisive, inescapable, unswerving essence, the form of its cloaking story as a dialogue of increased understanding; so much to learn from its form which is no form which works. Perhaps the usefulness of a non-beginning will also emerge.

The most meaningful opera might be an assemblage of strangers listening to the world.

The opera must transcend itself—send itself—surrender self—

[No inside no outside.]

Opera for our time, emerging from our human condition, the monkeys we are, here on this little planet among billions.

Opera, distributed cyberspace resonance, speaking, singing, changing, book, libretto, music, interactivity, drama, engagement, embodiment, thought space, non-thought, space, our symbolic species—true engagement with the impulses of differentiation, origins of substance.

Return again and again to the Diamond Sūtra, its soaring ascent into the manifestation of wisdom, its rhythm, its repetition, its use of
time in tuning beingness,
its pointing towards living at the impulse of the origin of the fact of existence.

Concepts

*This opera has no boundaries
 no beginning no ending
 illimitable*

Opera as ephemeral media
 Opera as distributed/mobile media
 Opera as place and time

Opera as no time no place

Blurring definitions/boundaries of

writer/composer/performer/audience/director/listener/viewer

Creative engagers

For the world

Sentience natural selection cooperative transformative engagement interbeings

«Foolish people aren't real. They thus can be transformed into sages.»

(Seng-chao, C.E. 384-414)

(See also Rosenboom, *Propositional music...*, and *Collapsing distinctions...*)

Processes

Only if not a single system of music is possessed can a useful system of music be formulated.

No system of music will be of use if one possesses a single system of music.

Propositional music proposed realities as no-realities in that way they are useful.

(See also Rosenboom, *Propositional music...*, and *Collapsing distinctions...*)

Wordsoundsoundswordsounds

spoken or half sung and chanted

become intelligible when read/examined as if making or listening to music.

Words are fused with music and ceremonial movement/dance.

Sound images emerge with dancing words.

A flash! The sound of the words drives the sound. The sound of the words is the genetrix of the music. Suppose the music is a configuration space of the seed syllables, the words they engender. How about that as a score?

*Opera without words
and without no-words,
that's why it uses words
That's why it's useless (use/less) or (use/more)*

Two operas one with music and no words one with words and no music playing side by side, juxtaposing the idea of music and libretto perfectly merged oneness undifferentiated with the idea of playing side-by-side illusory two-ness, one through coincidence. Implications for peaceful illumination bloom!

Story

The Diamond Sutra contains the wisdom to cut through the power of illusion and initiate enlightenment. Although it's a Buddhist scripture, we approach our source material as a nonsectarian text that offers insight into reality, emptiness and transcendence. In *AH!*, as in *The Diamond Sutra*, story is created and deconstructed simultaneously. Opera theater is itself a grand illusion, one that an audience welcomes and is entertained by, in fact, goes out of its way to engage with. In *AH!* we intend to use such illusion to draw individual and communal stories of experience to the fore.

Similarities

Numbers are important in *The Diamond Sutra*, as well as in *AH!*. The original version of *The Diamond Sutra* had 21 stories. The three jewels (the Buddha, his teachings dharma, the sangha) are at the center of Buddhism. *AH!* will contain linked mandala-wheel of stories and three will play a prominent role in the opera (arising/being/passing, beginning/middle/end, past/present/future, multiple selves). The stories in *AH!* Investigate:

The nature of perception (form/no form; identity/non-identity; what is the original face?)

The relationship between space and time (dimensions within dimensions; mathematics and measurements)

Transcending duality

Language obstacles

Illusion (people as music; people as audience/as actors; fleeting nature of everything)

Faith/Compassion

Specific Stories

The stories that make up *AH!* contain within them varying levels of culture and conflict. The mundane details of everyday life is flush against esoteric and transcendent realities. So for instance, in one story, a woman is woken up in the middle of the night by her ringing phone and an unknown voice is quoting lines from a Woody Allen movie (where begins the movie, the dream and death?), or a man whose wife has left him is being set up with women who, only to him, appear to be his ex (what happens to his simulacra dates when his wife dies in a freak accident?). Other stories explore meta-tales; for instance, in one story international, intergalactic archeologists find the oldest printed book ever, which happens to be *The Diamond Sutra* (true). Or, a group of individuals come to the theater to see an opera and find that they are the troupe of actors themselves (also true).

The stories that make up *AH!* have been divided into *arising* (beginning), *beings* (middles – sometimes multiple) and *passing* (end) sections so that they reformulate and re-compose during the opera performance as they share modules and become other stories. Also past, present and future at times collapses within stories. Characters from varying stories may find characters not in their story and link up (the threads of stories/the threads that link life) with them or find characters from different times and join their story. Some lines linking stories one to another are highlighted. Finally, the audience, too, has its story, a story that changes for each performance. That unique story will be uncovered in the performance itself as words and sounds audience members have contributed in advance through interactive web/mobile media experiences find their way into the the performance hall. At the end of the performance (not really the end, as discussed in the next paragraph), story has nested inside story, combining, linking all our lives and allowing for awakenings and joyful re-awakenings to unite the attendees of the performance.

Not the End

The concepts "the end" and "the beginning" (illusions) will be deconstructed in the stories. Contacting audience members with precursors of the opera through the technology in their lives (mail, computers, cell phones, etc.) before the actual performance and contacting them with remnants after the performance (initiated by the audience themselves) cuts through the illusion that energy is contained within limited timeframes. The stories of *AH!* are meant to intertwine with the audience's lives. And each audience member will leave a trace of their being in the performance of *AH!*

Possibly Useful References

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