

Influence of context on musical performance and reception



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Assignment 1 (40%): 2000 words (Excluding Bibliography)

Write a report of a musical event or experience that you have been involved in. How did the context influence the performance and reception of the music?

Live performance can be performed well and received respectfully, however, there is always a contextual variation on every performance given around the world. Within music, there are unlimited pathways for composers and performers to express, as well as unlimited ways for a listener to interpret. However, something a piece of music cannot go without, is context; this shapes the performance and the creativity of the composer and eventually the reception it gathers from a large audience in an opera house to a small school concert audience. In Christopher Small's *Musicking* he refers to the performance of music as "musicking" (Christopher Small, which is an interesting concept where performing music is used as a verb. For example, Small goes on to say, "Music is not a thing at all but an activity" (Christopher Small), showing that music is something that just happens, and it can be appreciated or critiqued, and always observed and performed. Furthermore, music is a social practice, something we do and something we are able to create, explore and share publicly. Music can be present in all genres of entertainment and even in all areas of life; music is everywhere, from the playlist in the off-license to a major music festival. However, what shapes the type of audience or genre of music is the context. For example, in an Indian restaurant there is more often than not, traditional Indian rag playing in the background. This choice of music relates to the context of the

restaurant and the countries that it may relate to and it would fulfil the customers visit.

In this assignment I will be expressing my opinion on the context of an operatic performance that my brother took part in as the lead role, a young Jewish boy, combating the challenging times in world war 2 that the Jews faced. The music from the Opera was written by musician Howard Moody, and was assisted by the astounding true story, from a Jewish holocaust survivor, Simon Gronowski. The opera follows the story of a young Simon, played by my brother, in 1943, when he was put on a train from the Dossin barracks in Belgium and was well on the way to Auschwitz with his mother, until she pushes him off the train, to enable him to escape, hence the Opera title, *Push*. The Opera is set in a Nazi Germany, where millions of Jews feared for their own lives and families lives because of the Nazi regime. Simon was one of few Jews that were lucky enough to escape the grasp of the Nazi's and was able to tell his story. Howard Moody expresses the storytelling of Simon through the music, as it is a heart-breaking, yet miraculous war story, as hundreds of millions of Jews lost their lives to the second world war, and Simon was just one of the lucky ones that had survived. I think in the context of the story, an opera was a well-suited choice of expression, as Opera has historical aspects of passion, death and love stories painted with musical expression. In *push*, there is a monotone feeling, especially when observing as I did in 2018. I saw the Opera performed in Chichester cathedral, the first performance ever of the opera. The acoustics of a cathedral are commonly described as "echoey" and "transcendent" by those that find the time to attend a Sunday eucharist, and listen to the choristers send their sound

rebounding about the cathedral and up the spire and down again infinitely. This is why I think that the composer Howard Moody thought it as a perfect space for this setting of opera. The sinister undertones emitting from the performers acting as Nazi patrol and train officers went well with the context of the story, and created a cold atmosphere in the cathedral, much-alike the feeling that a young Simon, along with thousands of other Jews on the train would be experiencing. The director chose to cast young children ranging from ages 7-11, which would be the realism of it, as Simon was 11 years old at the time. The young children only sang as a choir and let out cries for help in their song. The music that is scored for the young children has a melodic line that starts high as a plead for help and descends with despair before rising up again showing signs of hope. The experiences that a young child would have had on the train would be unimaginable without the explanations from Simon, and then the directing of the children would not be as accurate. The entirety of the opera is an expression and show of realism of the experiences of the hardships that Jewish families faced due to hate crime in the second world war from Nazi Germany and resonates with historical facts and first hand evidence thanks to Simon. If I were to return to the place of which I saw this Opera performed, Chichester cathedral, it has no geographical relationship to the story, yet having experienced the opera in a cathedral, the experience was received greatly; a host of elderly and young locals, gathering in a cathedral to hear and witness the unravelling of an intense and dramatic true story telling of a holocaust survivor. Simon Gronowski, in fact, was present at this performance and with great courage spoke about it after and said, " I put my faith in the future... because I believe in human goodness", he went on to say " my life is only miracles". <https://assignbuster.com/influence-of-context-on-musical-performance-and-reception/>

This shows his understanding of how life moves on, and how he believes that the human race can make these things right. Simon is a positive man, who had faced terror face-to-face in Belgium and Germany, yet he is still able to move on and look to a brighter future for humanity.

The performance itself was touching, a small casting of three main characters; Simon, Simon's sister, and the Train guard. Behind them the mass of children in plain clothing along with suffering mothers, accompanied by a small chamber orchestra. The sung parts from the soloists are lightly accompanied giving off a hopeless and weak emotion, joined to the emotional and outpouring of the young Simon. The singing melodies were simple, yet so effective for the context, as most of the time, on the train they would be silenced by the guards, which is shown as the tenor solo is often soft and sounds afraid. The guard shows a dominant character, forceful and a brute with no mercy in the most part of the opera, and sings with authority, which would have been the case, and would have been expressed by Simon in his story-telling.

On 28th January 2019, holocaust day, the opera was carried up to London to be performed at the house of commons, to mark the National Holocaust day memorial. I was not present but on the account of my brother, who performed once again as Simon, exclaimed it to be a memorable experience, and an emotional one too. To refer to the question with this, I can say that the context of the performance being on holocaust where hundreds of memorabilia of experiences are shared, has a grand impact on how the performance went, along with how it would have been received by

thousands, as it has even more meaning than just an opera being performed
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in Chichester cathedral on a Saturday evening.

Interestingly, the composer, Howard Moody, drew comparisons from older history previous to the world wars. In an online article, for the Battle music festival, he explained his process of research for the big task of writing an emotionally realistic opera. The first example of comparison he discovered was with William the Conqueror. He writes “ William the Conqueror’s savage reign of terror against the Anglo-Saxon during the twenty years following the battle” (Howard moody, no date). Howard Moody addresses the fact that William the Conqueror was ruthless, much alike the Nazi leader that Simon Gronowski and millions of other Jews suffered under. The comparison is a useful one, as it shows, as Moody puts it “ history repeats” (Howard Moody, no date), as in the second world war, especially in 1943 when Simon Gronowski had his experience, there was a minority that suffered because of a ruthless, tyrannical leader with absurd laws. From this, Moody draws his attention to the army that William the Conqueror recruited, “ from a Viking settlement” (Howard Moody, no date), and relates this ‘ settlement’ to the current state of migration and accounts of the “‘jungle’ refugee camp in Calais - as well as the devastating reports of Syria” (Howard Moody, no date). Howard Moody was able to draw aspects of pre-world war 2, along with current affairs in order to help structure and support his passionate cry for help for anybody in similar scenarios nowadays, like Simon Gronowski. There was a specific scenario in summer of 2015, Budapest, which involved migrants trying to get trains further into the EU, countries like Germany and France, and the world news stations were watching. The situation caused deaths, and injuries, and the most common being drownings, one stat showing 12 migrants who drowned in Turkish waters while trying to reach <https://assignbuster.com/influence-of-context-on-musical-performance-and-reception/>

Greece (BBC News, 2 September 2015). The experience was the opposite from Simon Gronowski's in a sense that the civilians were attempting to flee their own countries and find a better life in a stronger economic country like Germany. However, the scenario was similar in a way, because the people attempting the escape are being forced under government power to remain in their country and were restricted, aggressively from leaving. In order to fight for justice, and essentially their lives, migrants put themselves in dangerous and fatal situations where they are forcing their way out of their own country in order to reach the larger EU countries. This is similar to how a lot of Jews in the second world war would've fought for survival, just like the way Simon Gronowski's mother did for him, by pushing him off the train in order for him to survive. A sacrifice she chose to make. In a situation like the one in Hungary, with its Right-wing nationalist Jobbik party (BBC News, 2 September 2015) the government can take its side and become very aggressive with migrants and believe they don't have a place in their country. The governments of various countries, especially Germany in the second world war, Hitler was an ethnocentric leader, believing that the Jews were a burden on their society which resulted in the order of the Holocaust and hundreds of Military Concentration camps being placed all around rural Nazi Germany.

With his research, Howard Moody was able to create an effectively emotional opera that captured the minds of the audience at all the performances. He met Simon Gronowski again at the " Caserne Dossin in Melechen, where he had been imprisoned with his mother and sister – the place from which thirty-six trains went direct to Auschwitz" (Howard Moody, no date). This set

the scene for Moody, as he was able to capture the exact place Simon grew up and where he was so ruthlessly ripped away from to embark on his journey along with hundreds of Jews. He goes on to write “ we went through the archway where he had been put on the train, he pointed to an upper window and said, ‘ that’s where I last saw my sister’”, which would’ve jumpstarted the realism of the experience and how haunting the story really is. This encounter that Moody had experienced with visiting the train and Melechen, along with Simon, really helped him get his head around the composition and would’ve helped greatly with the writing of the emotion that was displayed through the solo voice parts. This, along with the ongoing message from Simon being ‘ Ma vie n’est que miracles’ (My life is only miracles) (Simon Gronowski, no date/Howard moody, no date)

The opera was written as a possible incentive and a definite cry out for government action on problems like the ongoing trouble with migration so that nothing like what happened in World War Two would happen again. The opera should have an immense reaction from all audiences that will see it in the future as it augments the reality of prisoners and refugee past and present. (*La Monnaie/De Munt* , no date)

- BBC News (2015) *Budapest migrant stand-off enters second night*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34128263>(Accessed: 9 October 2019)
- Howard Moody (no date) *Push – Composing Push* . Available at: <https://battlefestival.co.uk/education/push/composing-push>(Accessed: 9 October 2019)

- La Monnaie/De Munt (no date) *Push*. Available at: <https://www.lamonnaie.be/en/program/866-push>(accessed 17 October 2019)
- Small, C. (1998) *Musicking* . Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press.