

Presenter: Magdalena Ho Yan Tang
Affiliation: PhD Candidate, The University of Hong Kong
Contact: hytang1@hku.hk

Embodied Madrigals as Events: From the Renaissance, to the Renaissance of Performers as Interpreters¹

This research concerns choral music performance in relation to embodiment, musical meaning, and performance as social action. I consider aspects of staging, production, movement, presentation in my analysis. This research is part of my on-going ethnographic research from 2016, to understand choral singing practice in Hong Kong. Through my points of view as a choral director and singer, I participate and observe experimental choral theatre performances that unfold musical meanings of choral staples through embodied actions. For choral music, a musical practice that uphold community, collectivity, and notion of empowerment, it becomes a site for participants to perform their understanding of self and ideal society. In Hong Kong's context, with the intensified political tension since the Handover in 1997, art practitioners have sought to re-consider collective identity through rethinking the meaning of their routine repertoires and performances in relation to Hong Kong's relationship with her colonial past as a British colony, its current sovereign Mainland China and other international stakeholders.

This research focuses on the story of Singfest, a unique professional choir in Hong Kong established after 2000s. Among the choral community in Hong Kong, Singfest uniquely focuses on staple choral classics and explore their theatrical possibilities. Throughout the years, Singfest has established a reputation as an expert choral ensemble in repertoires by the Bach family, Monteverdi and Handel, which has been enhanced by their collaboration with Helmuth Rilling. This research analyzes selective Singfest performances and productions in 2017-2020, in which Singfest performed a semi-staged version of English madrigals, which included multi-media and theatrical elements. Singfest gives a fresh touch to these staple repertoires with urban Hong Kong stories. I argue, Singfest negotiates their relationships with these so-called 'foreign' repertoires, and articulates their responses with embodied actions. These embodied actions are not metaphorical or representative so to speak, instead, these actions are physical bodily engagement and interactions with meanings and expressivity. The process of such negotiation constructs the production of self and collective

¹ I borrow the term 'the interpreter's renaissance' from an article by Sarah Collins. Sarah Collins, "The interpreter's renaissance and the uncertain rhetoric of 'practice as research'", *Crossroads* 2, no.5 (2011): 127-129.

identity on what it means to be a Hongkonger, a cosmopolitan, and reimagine the notion of foreign and local.

Live performance: *Remembrance of Things Past* 說時依舊

Date: 28 July 2018

Venue: Multi-media Theatre, HKICC LEE Shau Kee School of Creativity



Figure 1. Singer interacts with a glowing LED lamp, presenting the orb while the ensemble sings John Holmes's *Thus Bonny-Boots*.



Figure 2. The orb as a connecting symbol between madrigals perform in the event. This is when the ensemble sings Thomas Morley's *Arise, awake*.



Figure 3 The screen shows multiple images taken from Hong Kong's natural scenery, remote islands, and Central CBD. At this moment, singers sing Arthur Sullivan's *The long day close in front of Sai Wan War Cemetery*, a cemetery for soldiers from WWI and II. This is the Stone of Remembrance, a memorial used across war cemeteries around the world for the Commonwealth death. When the song ends, they turn to the screen and interact with body gestures. The narrator takes the moment and recite Shakespeare's *Sonnet 116*, *Let me not the marriage of true minds*. See also a live recording here: [Link](#)



Figure 4. The event ends with a montage of images taken from a ruined Hakka village. At this moment, the stage shows image of a disposed box of mahjong, a common tile-based household game in Asia. The ensemble sings Robert Lucas Pearsall's *Lay a garland* as an epilogue, in coherence with the theme as the lost time, disappearances, and maidens (the orb) as a recurring symbol of Oriana. See also a live recording here: [Link](#)

Note: This performance is the graduation concert of a summer music camp for local secondary schools' students. Professional singers from Singfest sing alongside with the summer camp participants.

Besides live performances in the theatre, Singfest also produced short movies for online distribution from 2017-2020. Enchanted moments are seen in [Monteverdi in the City](#) (2017), [Sfogava con le stelle](#)

(2019), [The Returning](#) (2019), [Double Lives](#) (2020). A common trait of these short movies is that visual symbols of Hong Kong are included as part of the narratives construction, for instance Glass-wall skyscrapers, concrete jungles, contrasting images of the rich and the poor, and oceans. These symbolic images and movements accompanied by Renaissance sound create reflective moments to reimagine an alternative Hong Kong future. I suggest, embodied actions in performances are extension of dialogic discourses on selfhood, others, and identities, when one considers the abovementioned choral experiences collaboratively including the visuals, bodies, and the act of listening, or the so-called, performance as event.

References:

Clayton, Martin, Byron Dueck, and Laura Leante, eds. *Experience and Meaning in Music Performance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Denzin, Norman K. *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003.

Reinelt, Janelle G., and Joseph R. Roach, eds. *Critical Theory and Performance*. Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2007.

Rischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Acknowledgements:

All images and videos reproduced by permission of Singfest. Special thanks to Mr. Patrick Chiu. For more information, see: <https://www.singfest.hk>.