THE EMPATHETIC POTENTIAL AND IMPACTS OF OPERA DEVISING

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ABSTRACT

Devising is a collective approach to creating new works for performance, including in opera. However, due to opera's traditional culture, devising lacks both scholarship and a strong community of practice in the industry. The prioritization of tradition poses challenges for the industry to address issues of systemic discrimination and appropriation, including new opera. Drawing on a mixed-methods design of semi-structured interviews, a case study, and surveys designed to assess empathy, I investigate devising as an empathetic creation method that can expand diversity within the community and repertoire of opera. My findings support the use of devising as a means of offering audiences an opportunity to empathize with group-created opera. I also find that devising benefits artists by promoting agency and shared ownership, reducing perfectionism, and increasing equity and inclusion in new opera. My research comes with a call-to-action to integrate devising into post-secondary training to develop a community of practice.

DEDICATION

I am dedicating my thesis to my husband, Julius Haag, who was not only supportive of me doing this Master's later in life, but has also been a constant source of inspiration and motivation throughout this entire journey. I would also like to dedicate my thesis to our daughter, Audrey Smith-Haag, who grew inside of me for the majority of my writing process and was born on June 12, 2025, just as I was preparing to send this document to external readers. This paper grew with her, so when I think of this cherished time of developing myself as an artist through this research, I will always think of the joy Julius and I have felt as we waited for her to be brought into this world and finally get to meet her at the tail end of the journey with my thesis.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Opera is a much beloved art form with a rich history in Western society. This love comes with a desire to preserve and protect the culture and history of the medium through careful reproductions of canonical repertoire, as well as the maintenance of the industry's artistic and social traditions (Vincent, 2023). The behaviours and expectations of opera's community, comprised of artists, companies, arts workers, and audiences, are guided by a strong social code fostered during training and nurtured in the professional environment (Vincent, 2023, Bull and Scharff, 2017). Despite the undeniable level of commitment many have for the art form, opera as an industry is currently undergoing a reputational crisis, with repertoire and practices that are being called into question for racism, sexism, ableism, elitism, and other forms of discrimination and appropriation (Henry & Tator, 2016; Cheatham, 2016).

The solutions for opera's issues are undoubtedly innumerable and, like many systemic problems, unlikely to have a single adaptation that will offer all the answers. My research is specifically focused on the creation of new works, including a proposed solution for some of opera's social challenges that can arise in how new repertoire is developed and appreciated. Although there is a limited discourse around collectivist approaches in the opera industry, my research shows that, to counter the challenges they come up against with traditional methods, some artists are exploring a technique rooted in collectivism, known as devised creation. Through devising, artists are implementing an artistic strategy that can invite more types of people into the opera creation process, which, in turn, aids in building stories and music that reflect a broader profile of creators. My investigations into the devised opera process look at how opera can de-centre roles that traditionally hold supremacy in the creation process, such as composers and librettists, and reorient those roles toward a group context. My work proposes a creative cultural shift to diversify and expand the population pool of opera creators. Most importantly, my research seeks to understand how devising opera can offer audiences and artists an opportunity to empathize with, feel connected to, and learn from a wider array of people through operatic works.

An important facet of my research includes understanding the role of empathy in how artists create work in a group context and how audiences perceive these works. As Lanzoni (2018) describes,

empathy can be considered a tool for building the mechanisms of progressive change, noting that "calls for empathy have become more urgent in our current political climate with its steep rise in hate crimes, intolerant speech, and overt racism" (p. 4). When artists create an opera through devising, there is the potential for the group of creators to tell their own stories that audiences can directly empathize with, since "[d]evised processes are often deeply autobiographical, using the performers' own histories to create material, and the connection between the autobiography of the performer and their material is often explicitly highlighted in performance" (Picknett, 2016, pp.168-169). If an audience can empathize with a group of creators, as opposed to being restricted to works written by one or two people (i.e. the composer and librettist), a single opera would have the potential to more directly share the emotional worlds and stories of a broader array of communities and provide insight into topics that are informed by a more diverse intersection of individual perspectives.

Importantly, through my work, I do not intend to place greater value on one style of composition over another in terms of its value for artistic expression. However, my findings suggest that providing the choice to use devising methods would empower the opera community to create much needed change in the sector by allowing space for different kinds of projects and creators that audiences can engage with. Further, while there is a small community of practice, I argue that more can be done to introduce artists to devising earlier in their training to integrate the collectivist values of this process into the culture of opera. Incorporating devising into the pedagogical practices of opera may serve to one day impact the mindset of those who go onto professional careers since, as Lipkin (2016) describes, "[w]hen such students devise work, especially within the context of social issues, they have a different kind of conversation with themselves and one another; they realize a different kind of creative capacity" (p. 257). My research contributes to the pedagogical demystification of the devised process for opera, and positions devising as an attainable and beneficial approach to use when creating new repertoire.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Devising Opera: An Overview

Devising is a collaborative method that is comparatively underused and under discussed in the opera industry, in contrast to theatre and contemporary dance where it is a more common practice. Devising is broadly viewed as action-based collaborative creation. For example, Michael Picknett (2016), composer, performer, and scholar of devised music creation, defines devising as, "any workshop-based creative process in which the performance material is created and developed with the performers." He further notes that, "[d]evising's lack of concrete theoretical structures means that it is particularly difficult to define" (Picknett, 2016, p.156). By comparison, theatre director, actor, and interdisciplinary neuroscience researcher Rick Kemp (2019) describes devised theatre as "authored through action, with meaning arising dynamically from the simultaneous interaction of multiple people, objects and phenomena" (p.48). For example, a composer can enter a devising process with a stage director and team of production designers to co-create a performance piece, both narrative and non-narrative, with sound, music, light, text, and set props alone, without active performers. Although the team is often centred around performers, it is possible to create devised work without human performers. However, in the case of devised opera, the necessity of the voice means teams will most likely include performers at some point in the creation process.

Regardless of who comprises the team, the generative action of devised creation is most often improvisational in nature and used as a means of collaborative experimentation and exploration of ideas. Therefore, each team member is a resource for the devising process, directly affecting the process and product with their unique combination of skills and lived experiences. Devising artist and researcher Lindsay Brandon Hunter (2017) notes that the practice of devising is:

> …not only to invent a new piece of process, but often an entirely new way of working, one for which there is no blueprint. The use of a collaborative, evolving creative process might be a better litmus test for what constitutes devised process than any specific theatrical product, given that devised work comes in such wildly different forms. (p.163)

Hunter's statement about the deviser's focus on process corresponds with my own art practice in devising, which constantly changes based on the needs, goals, and resources of each project.

Through my process investigations, I have become certain that musical improvisation is one of the most effective collaborative tools to test and transform multiple sources of creative input and combat homogeneity in devised opera. Artists can implement improvisation at different points of the devising process. For example, in the research stages, artists can use it to create or expand proposals as a mining process for creative content. In this regard, I will refer to proposals as creative offerings that artists can use as catalysts of exploration. Further, in keeping with the inherent modularity of devising, proposals can take many forms and be introduced into the process in different ways. For example, they can be discovered by identifying themes in musical free improvisation, observing content pathways of free association, or discussing notable shared moments. Individual company members can also offer proposals for the group to explore or simply be inspired by, which might come instantaneously in process or be something they worked on or found on their own time. The more the team members offer proposals, the more they integrate themselves into the final product, regardless of whether the exact ideas are kept for further development or merely to inform and inspire the process overall.

Devised performances often evolve through improvisation and become solidified through the rehearsal process. As such, having a scribe on the team can be advantageous in documenting the piece as it forms. The importance of a scribe is reflected in the following observation by Kemp (2019), who acknowledges that "[w]hile devising processes incorporate improvisation, a devised piece that is presented to an audience generally has a 'performance score' that enables it to be repeated. Improvisatory performances are, by their nature, productions of meaning that are simultaneously generated and expressed" (p.49). Notably, while improvisation can be an excellent device for creation, devised pieces work toward a structure that becomes increasingly stable through rehearsal, much like a traditional opera. What sets devised opera apart from traditional is that its score structure could be fully detailed, exist as fixed pillars that support more flexible content, or as unfixed activation points that anchor the performance as it propels through time and the relative unknown. Much like devising

itself, the documentation of devised works is a bespoke process and may require a distinct process of research and discovery to determine the best method for each devised opera.

In general, research on devised creation is limited, but this is especially true for devised opera. Since, in many ways, it is ideologically contrary to the pedagogical practices of Western classical music, more scholarship on this creative process is needed to inform those working at the university level, as that is where the development of the next generation of artists is taking place. With the described process phases below, my objective is to provide an actionable starting point for anyone interested in devising opera and looking for a foundational place to start when thinking about building their own devised processes.

2.2. Devising Opera: The Creative Process

Below is a distillation of the various phases of a devised process, stemming from my experience of practice and observation in my career as an opera creator. These phases are not a hard-and-fast rule but, instead, a guide to help people think about how they might plan their process. It is important to keep in mind that this is not a linear process, and people may skip phases, work in different orders, or go back-and-forth between steps. I offer this to contextualize my thesis research.

1. Assemble the Devising Team:

   This is an important step, especially if the person organizing the group has a goal in mind. It is possible to set the project in a relative direction by assembling collaborators who have skills, interests, aesthetics, and even lived experience (with transparency from the producer, if this is a priority) that would be relevant to developing a piece with a certain objective.

2. Prompt:

   Prompts can be helpful in a devised process to give people a loose direction to start moving in. A prompt intends to inspire and not dictate. Groups may decide to abandon prompts as they continue with discussions, experiments, and discoveries of new themes to explore. A prompt can be used to start the whole process, but it is not essential to begin with one. Instead, the group can use improvisation and/or group discussion to find one.

3. Research & Discovery:

One may choose to forgo stage two and let the prompt emerge from the research and discovery process. This phase of the process is when improvisation and other forms of group experimentation take centre stage. Groups can use different strategies to explore and see how their skills, impulses, and interests combine with those of others. It is a time to discover emergent themes and content developed through improvisations and discussions and interrogate the various impulses that arise. These strategies can include, but are not exclusive to, free improvisation, guided improvisation, performance creation games, free association, chance creation exercises, and technological experiments. During this time, group members may also be tasked with bringing proposals to the group for exploration, such as pieces of self-generated writing like poetry or songs, found text or music, or discoveries from solo tech experiments. Proposals are one of the ways group members can heavily influence the piece as it develops. Furthermore, the group needs to understand that not everything proposed will make it into the piece, and everything offered is there to be shared. To this end, it is not uncommon for proposals to be transformed, added onto, performed by other group members, or not directly used at all.

It is natural for this part of the process to feel uncomfortable, unstable, and directionless at times. Some group members may feel insecure, especially when bringing in artists from disciplines that focus on more traditional creation methods, like classical musicians. It is immensely helpful to begin the process by letting people know that these thoughts and feelings might come up in this stage of the process and that it is completely normal. Be sure to remind the team of this at different points in the process, such as during daily check-ins.

4. Creation & Development:

This stage is about working toward finding meaning, even if abstracted, and forming content. Working toward finding meaning is often done by going back and forth between stage three and four, as this is typically not a linear process. Through conceptual exploration, more

focused experiments, and improv-based co-composition, the ensemble works together to discover and develop characters, scenes (music and text), and other capsules of creative content. At this point, general editing might already have begun but the work will still be in broad strokes and, therefore, the piece may still feel unclear as scenes begin to be formulated.

Some devised projects may choose to abandon this stage. At this point, a composer and librettist may choose to begin their writing from the research & discovery content alone. In this case, the opera is written in an otherwise traditional fashion but directly references the devised material. As a result of their experience with the devising process, they may choose to write sections into their pieces that necessitate continued co-creation.

5. Rehearsal & Editing:

This stage will likely be what most resembles a traditional rehearsal process, with the exception that one of the goals will be to assemble, cut, and arrange content from the creation and development stage to create the performance piece. Having a facilitator, like a director and/or composer, can help to make this process more efficient, but it is also possible for a team to do this work together and may be more in the interest of the project goals to do so. Depending on the group's goals, there may still be room for spontaneous creation and significant changes. As the rehearsal process progresses, spontaneity can become more contained or non-existent. The group may use this process phase to determine if and/or what they want to have scripted/scored, guided yet improvisatory, or free. It is also possible that this stage of the process may, at times, dovetail with stage four and sometimes even stage three, but that is likely to happen less as the group works toward preparing the piece for performance.

6. Sharing:

Sharing can take the form of a performance and/or score creation. A devised opera may be completely scored for performance, like a traditional opera, but can also be structured as guided improvisation. The goals of the sharing component of the project should be known before the process begins, to ensure agreement from everyone on the creation team, manage expectations, and allow the end destination to guide the process overall.

A central component of the above outline is that devising is a modular process, built to meet the needs and potential of the project's goals and contributors. Devising requires adaptability, openness to change, and immense creative generosity–all things that can require, as well as facilitate, training and personal growth. It shares much with music improvisation as a discipline. A better understanding of their parallels can demystify devised opera for those who are interested in exploring it in their art practice. Ultimately, the possibilities of devising are endless when you are open to true interdisciplinarity and intersubjectivity in the creation process.

2.3. Devising Opera: Improvisation as an Inclusive Entry Point

When undertaking a devised creation process, one can take many seemingly limitless approaches. The process and final piece are inevitably influenced by all the elements that come together to facilitate them, including, but not limited to, the team of collaborators, resources available (i.e., venue, equipment, instruments, support team), time, and emergent or initiating goal(s) of the project. Therefore, it is unlikely to fully duplicate a devising process and its results due to its inherent adaptability and responsivity. Both the piece and process become expressions of the practitioners and their environment. Kemp (2019) echoes Hunter's assertion that process is the focus of the deviser's work rather than the product, stating that it is "because the meaning of a devised performance is developed over time through process", adding that some form of improvisation, depending on the practitioners on the team, is an essential component of devising, noting the unifying feature of devising being "that at the start of the process, the full content or meaning of the eventual performance is unknown" (p.50). Therefore, pedagogical practices for devising must include skill development in improvisation, along with quick conceptual analysis, to ensure artists can respond to what is being created throughout the process. With this, they will have the core competencies needed to start and/or progress a devising process.

As discussed, a common starting point for devising is to work with a prompt, which the team can use as an artistic launchpad. Someone in a leadership role, such as the creative producer, director, composer, or librettist, may offer a prompt to start the project. Additionally, some projects may begin with a group discussion when initially convening the collaborators to brainstorm and decide together

on a prompt and/or themes to explore. In the case of opera, it is also possible to start with a libretto, particularly one that allows the ensemble to improvise and play with the text during the process of devising the score. Another option I am particularly intrigued by is letting prompts materialize through free improvisation to see what comes out of the group when their impulses collide. This method is well-known in devising circles through the teachings of Jacques Lecoq, a French physical theatre pedagogue and practitioner who "…believed that the starting point for theatre is not the text of a play, but an actor's playful engagement with sensorimotor experiences of his or her physical and social environments" (Kemp, 2019, p.52). Here, Kemp explains that Lecoq's approach aligns with the psychological theory of embodied cognition, which tells us "…that sensorial and motor experiences form the neural foundations for mental concepts" (p.52). This theory explains why many devising practitioners see their creation methods as effective ways to explore and build rich performances with layers of meaning. The importance of embodied cognition is rooted in the development of meaning and understanding, which are understood to be generated and strengthened by action-based participation, such as when creating the musical score for a devised opera through improvisation. Since the devised creation process often centres on performers, the mind-body integration found in embodied cognition nurtures an ample breeding ground for organically complex shows that have layers of conscious and subconscious meaning.

Research by cognitive psychologists Scott, Harris, and Rothe (2001) involved using improvisation to aid in monologue memorization and learning. Their results suggest that:

> [i]f two actors are acting in a scene in which they are referring back to the first time they met, it might behoove a director greatly to allow the actors to improvise that earlier scene to give them more of a background and character history as they learn the scripted dialogue relevant to that experience. (p.303)

Their research supports the theory of embodied cognition that the combination of cognitive, motor, and affect processing in improvisation can help participants better learn and memorize their material (p. 303). This finding suggests that by using embodied cognition practices, devising groups can create fuller realms of meaning for their productions. Since each collaborator is going through an individual process of embodied cognition, their constant collaboration allows them to affect others' processes

regularly and, in turn, themselves be affected. Therefore, I argue that this intersubjective interaction can lead devisers to develop an increasingly deeper understanding of the material they create together as they progress through the process. Since creators often offer elements of themselves as source material for creative exploration through improvisation and other instinct-driven methods, not only are collaborators better able to draw nuanced connections between various concepts, but they are also forming greater understandings of each other.

Facilitating a working environment where multiple individual perspectives can influence the development of a piece, in part or in full, is essential to devising. Having a plurality of perspectives provides an alternative to the single-filter style of traditional composition, thus allowing the piece to reflect and be influenced by a multiplicity of experiences, as opposed to that of a single person. Supremacy of the score, and its composer, can create power imbalances that make it challenging to have constructive conversations about sensitive topics, like cultural appropriation or the romanticisation of gender-based violence, as ongoing examples. To this end, highly influential improviser, double bassist, and composer Simon Fell (2015) contends that by expanding authorship:

> … it might be possible to erase two centuries' worth of drip-fed propaganda about musical geniuses and their inalienable right to tell other people what to do. In the process, one can reassert a musical environment where creativity and leadership are qualities possessed by all, to be exercised when necessary and as appropriate for the common good. (p.194)

The idea that creativity and leadership can be shared by a group of people is a common practice in devising. This notion is the core inspiration of my ongoing investigations in devising. In this regard, finding ways to let more people in the opera creation process can have positive outcomes for classical music, such as lessening hierarchical control, and facilitating genuine inclusion and diversity in the stories told through opera.

Devising groups may not simply have one person in a facilitative role but choose to switch off who is in this role at any given time. Although leadership roles often still exist in devising, they are approached from a collaborative perspective with more laterality, acknowledging that "[m]any models for group decision-making require neither total control from a central leader nor perfect consensus in

the absence of hierarchy" (Knopf, 2015, p.165). In my experience, complete consensus can make for a challenging process and result in a final product that is muddied by a lack of curation. Having some form of facilitative guidance can help a project take shape and find clarity.

As discussed, devising team members can switch in and out of leadership roles throughout the process. Instead of viewing these roles hierarchically, the team views them as equal, with responsibilities that can overlap, evolve, and be exchanged between collaborators. Some projects may choose to have people fixed in their roles according to their areas of expertise. However, such fixed roles are not necessary for the devising process, and there is flexibility to create blurred lines between roles through open and collaborative conversation, so expectations are clear. Similarly, Fell (2015) talks about the concept of the *leader/sideman* practice used in modern jazz, explaining that ensemble members are accustomed to taking turns as the leader and sideman, and this dynamic fosters a cohesiveness that is essential to their creative collaboration (pp.193-194). He goes on to perfectly convey the paralleled goals of musical improvisation and devised creation, stating that:

> [t]he central role of improvisation ensures that jazz has (like improvised music) a particularly highly developed awareness of the value of the individual creativity of the collaborator, and the more flexible examples will be able to spontaneously refashion any compositional structures to take account of exceptional contributions by collaborating musicians. The resulting music is understood to be a unique synthesis of the individual voices of all participants, not just those with posts of 'official' responsibility. (p.194)

Therefore, even in the most conservative devised opera examples, such as instances when there is a composer/librettist team that is drawing inspiration from devised research before they begin writing more traditionally, the group environment must remain a creative playground for the collective so that they remain the source of the content. With this approach, it is possible to integrate many characteristics of the devising team into the final piece, including different musical genres the team might explore.

When working in devised opera, I believe the musical styles do not need to be strictly classical. This departure from classical styles, of course, brings into question what opera is—a discussion beyond the scope of my thesis. For clarity's sake, I work from an inclusive definition of opera as an

umbrella genre, like how dance equally includes contemporary, hip-hop, and ballet styles. However, it is important to recognize that the styles used in the research and creation processes, including classical, can significantly affect how a piece develops musically and narratively. Therefore, musical styles function as an important dramaturgical choice that is often made before the process has even begun, such as during the assembly of the team or at any other point in the piece's development.

Genre, or style, can be an important consideration while improvising and groups may choose to adhere to one, multiple, or none at all. Derek Bailey (1992), a trailblazer in free improvisation, explains that musical improvisation can be identified as either *idiomatic* or *non-idiomatic*, stating that "[i]diomatic improvisation…is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom—such as jazz, flamenco or baroque—and takes its identity and motivation from that idiom", whereas "[n]on-idiomatic improvisation…while it can be highly stylised, is not usually tied to representing an idiomatic identity" (pp.xi-xii). For this paper, I will use the word 'improvisation' in reference to non-idiomatic practice, including free improvisation. Conceptually, this is an ideal place to start when discussing devised creation, noting that artists can choose to incorporate idiomatic practices in full, or in part, in whichever way serves them and the piece. Idioms are steeped in cultural information and are rooted in shared systems of meaning. Therefore, idiomatic styles come with practices and lexicons of metaphors inherent to the genre. These can signal messages to the audience and be an incredibly powerful tool in creating interpretive specificity.

Some argue that there is no truly non-idiomatic music, and styles like free improvisation are defined by stylistic conventions of their own (Bullock, 2010). When devising opera, it could be advantageous to incorporate Bullock's (2010) notion of *self-idiomatic music*, which suggests "that each improvising musician becomes his or her own idiom" (p.141). He goes on to explain that "self-idiomatic music is primarily concerned with processes and operations rather than the realization of foregone conclusions (a composed piece of music, or the expression of a genre, for example)" (Bullock, 2010, p.144). For this reason, this approach is ideal for the research stage but likely less helpful as the team develops a shared style. Through the devised process, the music of individuals becomes less self-oriented and, instead, becomes self-inclusive, along with the sounds and ideas of the rest of the team. As Picknett (2016) describes, "[b]ecause the material for the project is created

through the performers' improvisations on those instruments in rehearsal, the piece forms around the instrumentation of the group and is idiomatic to that particular group of musicians" (p.160). Therefore, the group forms its own musical vocabulary, infused with multiple sources of input as they discover the dramaturgical purpose of the piece.

Improvisation is an incredible tool in the pursuit of participant inclusivity and diversity. Bailey (1992) aptly describes why this is the case, stating, "[f]ree improvisation, in addition to being a highly skilled musical craft, is open to use by almost anyone – beginners, children and non-musicians. The skill and intellect required is whatever is available" (p. 84). Improvisation can provide an entry point for people of different abilities, skills, and experiences to co-create through opera. One rather extreme example of this was Musica Elettronica Viva's Sound Pool events in 1969, Rome, Italy, which Curran (2006) describes as "inevitably developed into independent throbbing dense polyphonies, multiple walls of sound of any colour, speed, density and feeling" (p. 486). Sound Pool was an open invitation for people to participate freely, with the understanding that anything can be music. Curran talks about the process of Sound Pool as collective-spontaneous sounding, with the message that any sound, effort, and interaction are valid music-making (p. 486). These events eventually became internationally famous for their ability to instigate riots, which Curran describes as:

> …a sea of freely mutating human symphonies which could at certain moments bring to mind a Cage 'Music Circus', a Pauline Oliveros 'Meditation', or even a Globe-Unity mass improv., though none of those models suffice to describe the levels of ecstasy or life-threatening chaos generated during some of them. These were musics characterized above all by a shocking absence of authority or leadership, which at times shocked even us. (2006, p. 487)

Beyond the music, the profound social effects of eliminating the constraints on music-making are certainly noteworthy. Although not the practice of devising I have been discussing, there is something to learn from Sound Pool's radical openness and the wildly unexpected resultant outcomes. Building on the lessons learned from Sound Pool, the collective-spontaneous sounding described by Curran could be used as a devised research exercise to discover proposals or get a new group of collaborators to let down their guard and shake off the chains of perfectionism and individualism.

By scattering improvisation throughout the devised opera process, collaborators are constantly reminded to take risks and offer new ideas. In doing so, it is reinforced to collaborators that what are perceived as mistakes can be ephemeral and simply disappear in the devising process, or they can become new sources of inspiration. As Fell (2015) points out:

> Free improvisation can very quickly result in extraordinary and dramatic music; of course it can also result in much less extraordinary music, but it shares these potential outcomes with pre-determined music without the investment in work-specific preparation and a general hierarchical command-and-control structure which composition tends to imply. (p. 191)

By utilizing liberating collective methods, like improvisation, devisers can work together to unearth authentic, raw material that can only be revealed through the juxtaposition of creative synergies and collisions.

Ultimately, improvising can be a tool of empowerment for opera creators in an industry that expects perfection and assimilation. Composer and music, spirituality, and theology scholar June Boyce-Tillman (2012) asserts that Western classical music and other forms of Western culture continue to be suppressed into a *monoculture* that is dictated by a hierarchal, patriarchal system originating from early Christianity, stating that theorists therefore view "methods of play used in improv as a political act…because it embraces the notion of the workshop with all its connotations of crafts and working class skills" (p. 29). As an extension, devising opera is undoubtedly a revolutionary act that redistributes power into the hands of the various people who bring the work to life and provides opportunities to those not traditionally involved in the creation process of opera.

2.4. Understanding Empathy and its Role in Performance Creation

The 'grand art form' of opera is formed by the combination of multiple, simultaneous creative means of expression, which can include dance, visual art, poetry, theatre and, of course, music. Through the vast expressive vocabularies within these various art forms, observers are offered an array of clues into the affective experience of an operatic production (Batles et al., 2011). In fact, it was specifically opera's multi-dimensional format that was seen to intensify the music-induced

emotions of participants in the 2011 experimental study by cognitive neuroscientists Felicia Rodica Batles and colleagues, which is thought to be the first study to observe the cumulative emotional impacts of separated elements of an opera (Batles et al., 2011). Specifically, the study involved participants listening to an excerpt of the Italian opera *Tosca*, starting with only the music (participants did not know Italian), then listening to the music again after having read the plot, and, finally, by watching a video of the staged performance with subtitles. The study concluded that the sequentially added elements influenced and intensified the emotional responses of the participants. Batles and Miu (2014) went on to study the personal emotional impact of opera outside of the laboratory setting, finding that live opera, indeed, has the ability to directly elicit emotional responses in its audience. Notably, the emotional experience of opera is said to be less often studied in psychological research due to the complexity presented by the rich combination of emotion inducing audio-visual stimuli that can make it challenging to identify the direct cause of participant responses (Batles et al., 2011, p. 156).

The aforementioned studies specifically looked at emotions that the researchers believed to belong to the participants themselves, rather than the participants' perception of the opera's emotional intent. This points to a need for specificity when discussing emotion perception in relation to art. In the case of Batles et al. (2011), agreement in participant responses may be a stronger indication of emotional contagion than empathy, since the participants were only asked how they personally felt. Emotional contagion is defined as "the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person's and, consequently, to converge emotionally," therefore leading one to "'catch' others' emotions as a consequence" (Hatfield et al. 1993, p. 96). When someone 'catches' other people's emotions, they feel them as their own, which is a misattribution of the emotional source and thought to be a lower-level cognitive function than empathy. As Decety and Singer explain, "[i]n contrast to empathy, there is no self-other distinction in emotional contagion: One is not aware that one's emotion was elicited by observing another person's emotion" (2011, p. 3). Due to the researchers' line of inquiry, by asking the participants how they felt in response to the stimuli, any emotional alignment that the Batles et al. (2011) participants had with the piece would be the result of them 'catching' those emotions from the piece itself and feeling them

as their own. Empathy is differentiated from emotional contagion by its qualification that the emotions one experiences are attributed to someone or something else, not to themselves (Maibom, 2017, p. 2). I will discuss this further later in the chapter.

Audience empathy is an important consideration because it allows people to receive emotional information from the piece itself on a conscious level, allowing them to engage with the work more critically, rather than passively. Music psychology researchers Egermann and McAdams (2013) demonstrated that, when music listeners have higher levels of general empathy during music listening, their self-reported perceptions of the emotions contained within the music, versus the emotions they felt in response to the music, were more closely aligned than those of participants with lower empathy scores. In other words, the emotions felt by their participants were more likely to be indicative of empathizing with the music, rather than of emotional contagion. Egermann and McAdams go on to explain that "emotions might be understood as a form of emotional communication" and "[t]hese interactions might occur between musicians and listeners, but also among listeners" (2013, p. 151). Clearly, empathy is a significant fixture of the artistic experience and, as Egermann and McAdams (2013) describe, a way for information to be conveyed to audiences. Art, not just music, allows people to experience and express emotions in ways that may not exist in real-life, such as with Expressionism or Surrealism. I argue that one of the most powerful skills an artist has is the ability to elicit an empathetic response in their audience, which can be achieved to varying degrees and impact the audience's ability to accurately receive the messages of the piece.

For something that feels so innate and natural for many people, empathy is an extremely complex phenomenon that continues to be infused with debate in the pursuit of fully defining what it entails. In basic terms, pure empathy is the ability to feel and understand the emotional experiences of others through observation or imagination or, in other words, "our capacity to put ourselves in someone else's shoes" (Singer and Decety, 2011, p. 2). The quest to definitively explain the source of empathy, and its functions, binds the fields of psychology and art in their shared effort to explain our ability to experience the emotional worlds of others. The term empathy was formalized through the philosophical ecosystem of art appreciation to better comprehend the deeply human need to understand others, including the non-human other, like a piece of music (Matravers, 2017). However,

it is understood "that 'empathy' is an inherently eclectic concept that tolerates no dogmatic claim about what it 'really' is. Nor has it ever been otherwise" (Debes, 2017, p. 60). As a result, the concept of empathy continues to inspire and intrigue artists, audiences, and researchers from various disciplines, with the hope of understanding how people relate to, and impact, one another and the world around them.

Much scholarship exists about the etymology of the term empathy, which started in the philosophical field of aesthetics. Although others before him discussed theories that led to this, Robert Vischer coined the German term *Einfühlung* in 1873 to describe the experience of 'feeling into,' primarily concerning a human who uses a process of imagination to 'feel into' a non-human object, such as a painting or a blade of grass (Pigman, 1995; King & Waddington, 2017; Matravers, 2017). Renaissance literature and intellectual history researcher George Pigman (1995) asserts that "*Einfühlung* comes into existence as a part of an effort to find symbolic content in abstract or non-human forms" (p. 239). For example, recalling the research of Egermann and McAdams (2013), when listening to music, we may be able to feel, within ourselves, what is being expressed in the piece. In this case, *Einfühlung* can be achieved intentionally and/or unintentionally as an automatic response. It can also be experienced physiologically, such as getting chills or emotional piloerection (i.e. goosebumps), and/or via one's cognitive thoughts (McPhetres & Zickfeld, 2022). These different ways in which we experience *Einfühlung* also reflect more contemporary understandings of empathy that will be described later in this chapter.

The concept of *Einfühlung* continued to evolve to encompass meanings beyond aesthetics. For example, in 1903, philosopher Theodor Lipps expanded the use of *Einfühlung* to include understandings of another person. The key difference from Vischer's use of the term, as explained by Pigman (1995), is that "Lipps does not subscribe to pantheism. His writing avoids the mysterious and the mystical, and remains soberly philosophical and scientific" (p. 241). Through Lipps, *Einfühlung* entered the discourse of psychology as a core facet of the discipline in its attempt to understand other people's mental states, eventually garnering the deep interest and respect of Sigmund Freud (Pigman, 1995). Lipps' use of *Einfühlung* referred to an imitative process that humans instinctively do, in "which a person imitates the movement or expressions of an object or individual" (King &

Waddington, 2017, p. 1). This interpretation recalls the common expression used by performing artists of 'embodying' a character, concept, or object. Broadly speaking, the artist achieves this embodiment by exploring features of these subjects through an interpretive process of physical and/or internal mirroring, with Kemp (2012) explaining that "Both 'internal' and 'external' approaches to embodying a character work through physiological processes to stimulate the imagination" (p. xviii). These processes ignite imagination in the artist, who uses it as information to further inform their creative work. Once that cumulative work is shared with an audience, there is a sort of spiderweb effect of triggered imagination, and each audience member has the potential to undergo their own internal embodied process through observation of the performance. Although different theories and techniques can be implemented, artists use embodiment to attempt to achieve a perceived sense of credibility in their observable performance that the audience can, in turn, 'feel into' (Kemp, 2012, p. 194).

The goal of artistic creation is to communicate with its viewer, both consciously and unconsciously. As such, it is understandable why the creation process strives to achieve a sense of truth so that audiences can experience the work as a sort of alternative reality. If the work is believed to be a representation of reality, which can be done through abstraction, symbolism, and realism, this sense of truth offers the audience more concrete information to imitate in their minds and bodies. As Pigman (1995) describes, drawing on Lipps, "because psychic experiences are distinctive, by imitating the expression we experience the corresponding emotion. Then we feel the experience back into the other's expression and thereby understand what the other is experiencing" (p. 251). Therefore, the performer's process of embodying elicits empathetic understanding in themselves, in the spirit of Lipps' *Einfühlung*, and provides the artist with information to interpret and convey to an audience who, as observers, undergo a similar process.

From the artist's creation process to an audience's consumption of their work, there appears to be a domino effect of *Einfühlung* when done effectively. The relevance of this effect underscores the importance of the performer having a sound process of embodiment to ensure that they are clearly communicating the piece's information. Kemp (2012) outlines the psychological process of an actor's embodiment of a character, which fits into the practice of Konstantin Stanislavski's Method of Physical Action, which he proposed in the latter period of his career, stating that:

> …an actor identifies with a character by developing a range of behavior that expresses his or her understanding of the character's intent, that is credible in the fictional circumstances, and that forms a temporary situational self through the imagination, with Feelings that arise through a proprioceptive combination of physical actions and empathetic stimuli in the fiction. (2012, p. 154)

Consequently, many performers view the character-building process as an act of empathy. Using empathy, or *Einfühlung*, in character preparation requires maintaining the stability of one's sense of self as one relates and 'feels into' the character's experience and their prescribed situation. The centrality of stability of self in Stanislavski's Method of Physical Action is an important distinction since some techniques, like Method acting, call for an inside-out approach that has the actor become enmeshed with their characters by melding the 'self' with their character to create a perceptibly authentic performance (Kemp, 2012, p. 85). This approach is an area of debate in the performing arts community due to questions of if it is safe for the performer. Research has indicated that when using an inside-out method, like Method acting, there is a risk of a character's identity blurring into the personal life of the performer, in addition to the potential harm that can come from having to relive past traumas while on stage (Burgoyne et al., 1999). Clearly, one's creative process can have consequences beyond the work that is shared with audiences and is a topic worth having more conversations and research about.

Actor Joshua McLucas (2013) sounded the alarm about the risks of Method acting in his opinion piece in *The Medium*, titled *Crying on Cue: Why Method Acting is Abuse*. In this piece, McLucas expresses a concern that others share in the industry, that Method acting necessitates the actor to feel real emotions and be in the character's mindset as if it were their own, declaring that this can lead to dangerous outcomes for the actor's psychological safety. McLucas provides the example of well-known Method actor Heath Ledger, who many believed died from an accidental drug poisoning that resulted from the psychologically assimilative process he underwent to become the character of the Joker, the primary antagonist in the 2008 film *The Dark Knight*. Ledger's use of Method acting would have called on him to genuinely feel and think like the character he was tasked with portraying on film, who Ledger described as a "psychopathic, mass-murdering, schizophrenic

clown with zero empathy" (Skryabin, 2021, p. 329). Rather than empathy or *Einfühlung*, I argue that the emotional experience of artists practicing Method acting more accurately falls into the category of emotional contagion, which is widely believed to be related to, but not synonymous with, pure empathy. Emotional contagion is reflected in the blurring effect from this inside-out creative process, which presents challenges for some performers when they want to shed the internal state of their characters since their personal thoughts, behaviours, and emotions can become so intertwined with those of their characters.

Emotional contagion is a possible risk of Method acting, especially when it requires the artist to subject themselves to a character's distressing emotions and psychological states. When this happens, the artist may feel as though their character's emotions are their own, making it challenging to disengage from them (Burgoyne et al., 1999). In the case of Ledger, McLucas (2013) argues that he was not able to separate from the psychological state of the Joker character after filming ended and that this may have contributed to his untimely death. It is, thus, imperative to have an artistic process that maintains one's sense of self, separate from the character, and takes psychological safety into account when doing creative work with emotionally distressing content. Empathy and *Einfühlung* offer a helpful alternative process to Method acting that people can draw on from their daily lives.

In 1908, a few years after Lipps broadened the scope of *Einfühlung*, psychologist Edward Titchener proposed the English translation of the concept using the term *Empathy*, which became widely accepted and eventually used in psychology textbooks by 1913 (Lanzoni, 2018, p. 9). Titchener viewed empathy as a kinaesthetic mimicking process in response to the visual observation of another, resulting in a sort of shared experience to relate to and understand (David, 2017; Lanzoni, 2018). Titchener's definition also recalls Stanislavski's Method of Physical Action, underscoring the continued link between theories of understanding empathy and theories of generating empathetic performances. Further, the 1908 definition brings us closer to contemporary characterizations of empathy, which have been given greater specificity through the rise of empirical research in this area.

One of the most significant areas of recent discovery related to empathy occurred in 1992 when a group of Italian neuroscience researchers observed that the neurons activated in the prefrontal cortex of macaque monkeys during an action, such as lifting a dish or eating, were similarly seen to be active

when the monkeys simply watched someone else do the same task (Debes, 2017; Lanzoni, 2018). The significance of this finding is underscored by the understanding that "the prefrontal cortex plays an important role in higher integrative functions such as information processing, thinking, understanding, attention, behavior, motivation, emotions, working memory, and analysis" (Starcevic and Filipovic, 2018, p. XI). Notably, the neuron activity the Italian researchers witnessed in this region was not accompanied by an observed motor response (Singer and Decety, 2011). Research has offered evidence for the theory that mirror neuron activity from observation is indicative of action-understanding, rather than of the execution of an action (Binkofski and Buccino, 2006). From this perspective, action-understanding results from an observer seeing an action, whether behavioural or emotional, and allows the observer to presume why, how, and what is happening from the perspective of the person executing the action. However, whether mirror neurons result in true empathy continues to be an area of controversy (Debes, 2017). In 1996, after subsequent confirming studies (Gallese, Fadiga, Fogassi, & Rizzolatti, 1996; Rizzolatti, Fadiga, Gallese, & Fogassi, 1996), the Italian research team coined the term 'mirror neurons' to describe this phenomenon of mirrored neural activity through observation (Debes, 2017, p. 54).

Mirror neurons are activated in both instances of doing and seeing an action, including the expression of emotions, and are thought to offer some explanation for human empathy (Debes, 2017, pp. 54-55). Although it remains an area of ongoing theoretical investigation, the discovery of mirror neurons has served to further demystify empathy, allowing it to be less of an abstracted, aesthetic concept and, instead, exist in a more scientific discourse. For example, as Singer and Decety (2011) explain, mirror neurons:

> suggest that we come to understand others' actions, sensations, and emotions by means of the activation of the neural representations corresponding to those states: To understand what others are doing, we simulate their movements using our own motor program; to understand what others are feeling, we simulate their feelings using our own affective programs. (p. 3)

The theories of how mirror neurons function may offer insight into why empathetic emotions can feel so vivid within us since, during mirror neuron activity, research suggests that the brain undergoes a

similar neural process as when we experience things directly. Philosopher of moral theory and the history of ethics, Remy Debes, describes why many researchers believe mirror neurons display the capacity for empathy in the brain, noting that "[t]he neural pathways stimulated by merely seeing someone smiling or frowning or gagging, for example, are the same, or very nearly the same, as the pathways stimulated were we ourselves actually feeling joy or sadness or disgust" (2017, p. 54). Research suggests that stimulation of our mirror neurons does not result in or necessitate a corresponding physical movement (Debes, 2017). As such, unlike the theories of Lipps and Titchener, mirror neurons may help us better understand why many audience members find themselves having strong empathetic responses to dramatic performances without having to mimic the observable behaviours that performers use to convey emotional messages.

The empathetic embodiment of another person's emotional experience, suggested to be a possible result of mirror neuron activity, would also point to an understanding that audience members do not need to physically enact performances to cognitively and autonomically acquire the action-understanding of them on an emotional level. Theatre director and actor Bruce McConachie (2008), who has published extensively about theatre and cognitive science, explains that:

> Spectators do not wait to deploy empathy, but engage it unconsciously right from the start of every performance to help them figure out where to focus their attention, who these characters are, and what their story is about. Empathy is a proactive search engine that is always ready to engage intentional onstage action and mirror it for meaning…Cognitive scientists and philosophers…have strong evidence that it is audiences who mirror the actions of those they watch on stage; cognitive imitation is a crucial part of spectating. (p. 72)

The action-understanding provided by mirror neurons may also explain the efficacy of the collaborative research process in devised creation. Often, the group's research phase of devising involves different forms of autobiographical storytelling amongst the co-creative team members to inform the developing content of the piece. For example, some groups choose to share spontaneously through improvisatory, movement-based exercises, or group members might draft a script or scenario for a scene for their colleagues to cold read or improvise. Others may opt for more conversational

methods to tell their peers about their experiences and themselves. Regardless of the method of sharing, these symbolic or explicit disclosures expose artists to the emotional experiences of their colleagues. Given our understanding of mirror neurons, it could be argued that, like with audiences, observation can elicit a form of internal embodiment for artists through mirror neuron activation, presumably resulting in action-understanding and, consequently, an empathetic response. Debes (2017) outlines the observational function of mirror neurons, stating that:

> When we act or feel an emotion, we have somatic, experiential representations of our actions and feelings, even if we are not always attending to them. And the neural stimulation that corresponds to these somatic representations is precisely what is getting mirrored. At any rate, this is the plausible import of the neural stimulation being of a motor, somatosensory, or limbic kind, and why the literature often describes this non-observational component of the representation as "embodied" or "visceral" (see e.g. Gallese 2004)…In particular, the implication is that mirroring allows us to grasp some aspect of the mental states of the actor or emoter, and it is this that allows us to understand what the action or emotion is about. (p. 59)

The devised process offers collaborators the opportunity to viscerally mirror the experiences of their fellow creators and acquire a level of understanding that allows them to effectively participate in the process as a cohesive, co-creative group, even when the themes of the story do not personally reflect the lived experiences of all members of the team.

The emergence of theories concerning mirror neurons has contributed to a growing recognition that, on some level, we may be neurologically primed to understand the experiences of others as a third party, which some researchers believe is related to forms of empathy. Importantly, if mirror neurons suggest that the human brain is built to automatically mirror both the actions and emotions of others, thus resulting in action-understanding, this would offer additional reasoning for the use of creative performances as a potential means of conveying important social messages to audiences, since they would have the potential to understand without necessarily having to have the same direct experiences as the performers. These theories would strengthen the argument for using devising methods for opera creation that engage with important social justice issues, such as racism or

gender inequality, even in cases when not all members of the creation team have direct lived experiences with these issues being explored.

The concept of mirror neurons remains highly debated amongst researchers, particularly in their ability to fully explain the human capacity for empathy. While mirror neurons offer some seemingly tangible evidence that empathy, to some extent, functions on a neurological level and not simply a philosophical one, there is still much that remains unknown. For example, some argue that mirror neurons only indicate a narrow subset of empathy, with Debes (2017) noting that "those who wish to explain empathy by reference to mirroring [are] to specify far more precisely what they mean by "empathy" than they hitherto typically have. Indeed, the only safe conclusion at present is that it is unsettled what kind of "empathy" emotion mirroring really explains" (p. 62). This tension points to the complexity of the empathetic experience. Particularly, if we want to understand empathy, we must recognize that there are different expressions of it and qualifying characteristics that make it distinct.

Investigations of empathy have continued to evolve from the philosophical to the empirical, which has created even more specificity and understanding of what it is and how it works. Researchers currently understand empathy as necessitating the self-aware experience of someone else's emotional state (Singer & Decety, 2011). Therefore, it is not enough to be able to understand the other person's reasons for having an emotion or identify what emotion they are experiencing, but one must have their own vicarious emotional experience of what they perceive as corresponding to the state of the other person, while knowing that it does not actually belong to themselves. The difference between simply understanding the emotions of another and feeling empathy is elaborated upon by Singer and Decety (2011), who explain that:

> "mentalizing" refers to the drawing of inferences about other people's mental states, including their affective states, but it does not entail emotional involvement as in empathy. The specific qualia, the way it feels for the other person to be in pain or to rejoice, is missing. Such a distinction is supported by research in psychopathology. For instance, psychopaths have an understanding of other people's mental states, including their affective states, and consequently are very good at manipulating other people. At

> the same time, however, they lack the experience of empathy; this deficit can result in antisocial behavior. (pg. 552)

Here, Singer and Decety distinguish between affective empathy (felt and assessed) and cognitive empathy (assessed but not felt). This distinction also affirms affective empathy as a pro-social form of relating to the emotions of others, which points to why artists might hope their audience would not only mentalize the emotional experience of their creative work but would, instead, 'feel into' its affect empathetically. This distinction would be especially true for any artist who has explicit pro-social goals for their work.

As one learns more about the history and evolution of the concept of empathy, it makes sense why it is used so broadly in public discourses to encapsulate so many different ways in which people feel with and for others. Knowing that artists can use empathy in the creative process to develop impactful performances, as well as representing a safer method in which they can relate to the subjects they are trying to embody, it stands to reason that there should be a greater emphasis on teaching artists what empathy is and how it works so that it can be nurtured as a creative skill. However, the variations between how researchers have operationalized empathy make such teaching a complicated task. For example, Batson (2009) writes about eight distinct phenomena that each get called empathy by some, while being deemed disqualifiable by others:

> It would simplify matters if empathy referred to a single object and if everyone agreed on what that object was. Unfortunately, as with many psychological terms, this is not the case. Both empathy and sympathy (the term with which empathy is most often contrasted) have been used in a variety of ways. Indeed, with remarkable consistency exactly the same state that some scholars have labelling empathy others have labelling sympathy. I have discerned no clear basis—either historical or logical—for favoring one labelling scheme over another. The best one can do is recognize the different phenomena, make clear the labelling scheme one is adopting, and use that scheme consistently. (2009, p. 8)

Despite the many advancements in the pursuit of understanding empathy, the complex ways in which humans relate to each other continue to cause disagreement. Maibom (2017), whose work specializes

in empathy, psychopathology, responsibility, and theory of mind, offers a helpful distillation of the different expressions of affective empathy. She explains that even within the scope of an affective experience in relation to the emotions of others, there is still the possibility of further segmentation and specificity to call into question if the experience is indicative of true empathy. In elucidating these distinctions, she provides four situational descriptions:

> **Affective empathy**
>
> Person S empathizes with person O's experience of emotion E in situation C if S feels E for O as a result of believing or perceiving that O feels E, or imagining being in C.
>
> **Sympathy/empathic concern**
>
> Person S sympathizes with person O when S feels sad for O as a result of believing or perceiving that something bad has happened to O, or S feels happy for O as a result of believing or perceiving that something good has happened to O.
>
> **Emotional contagion**
>
> Person S's feeling E is a case of emotional contagion if S feels E as a result of believing that person O feels E, perceiving that O's expressing E, or of imagining being in O's situation.
>
> **Personal distress**
>
> Person S is personally distressed by person O's experience of emotion E in situation C if S feels E – not for O, but for herself (S) – as a result of believing or perceiving that O feels E, imagining being in C, or as a result of believing that something bad has happened to O. (2017, p. 2)

Maibom explains that of these four, most researchers only qualify affective empathy and, to a lesser extent, personal distress as true empathy. The level of empathy expressed by personal distress is directly related to the level of attribution to the other person that the empathizer has of their distress, with Maibom describing that if "she focuses on the origin of the distress, the target becomes the most important locus of distress, and hence she comes to feel her distress as empathic" (2017, p. 3). Here, Maibom makes an important distinction in stating that those who disproportionately feel distress for themselves because of someone else's negative state or situation can resultingly become more

aggressive, have more difficulty adjusting socially, and be more likely to distance themselves from the source of distress (2017, p. 3). For artists, this highlights the crucial importance of ensuring that audience members can maintain a level of objectivity while also experiencing the emotions of the piece. Particularly for projects that have pro-social aims, attempts to foster this level of objectivity amongst audience members may increase the likelihood of them subsequently engaging with the themes of the piece outside of the performance environment.

Although this is not the only worthy goal of artmaking, artists often aspire to connect with audiences on a deeper level by creating work that elicits emotional responses to messages contained within the piece. Here, the aim is not only to foster a high level of understanding amongst audiences about the overt or explicit messages the artist is attempting to convey through their work but, rather, to offer an experience of 'feeling into' the work in response to what they are witnessing. For audience members, this 'feeling into' may take the form of true empathy, sympathy, emotional contagion, or other related phenomena. As discussed earlier, opera audiences have multiple access points for 'feeling into' a performance, including emotional messages that artists convey through visual representations of meaning via the set and lighting design, the linguistic expression of the libretto, somatic messages generated by visceral mirroring of the physical performers, and audio input through the music. These multiple access points are why opera offers so much potential for generating rich, empathetic audience experiences. However, with that said, artists cannot have ultimate control over the empathetic experiences of their audiences, with one of the significant reasons being that individual audience members will have different levels of trait empathy before going into the performance. As such, it stands to reason that empathetic experiences can, and will, vary greatly between individual audience members experiencing the same performance. This variation in perception and experience is part of the subjectivity of art and something for artists to understand to have realistic expectations of their work and audiences.

2.5. Social Impacts of Devising Opera

As discussed in the introduction, the culture of opera comes with deep traditions that influence who can participate in the creation and performance processes, how the work is created and presented, and how audiences engage with the work. The conservative underpinning of opera can be difficult to shift, as it is maintained by artists and audiences alike, with views establishing a 'right' and 'wrong' way to create, share, and appreciate the art form. These beliefs form the systemic controls of opera that dictate the parameters of ingroups and outgroups and contribute to many of the longstanding inequities in the industry. Vincent (2023) provides an explanation for this issue, noting that:

> The combination of Scripture [the score] and Tradition allows traditionalist audiences to establish a benchmark of practice for ephemeral stage interpretations. However, the reliance on Scripture and Tradition as the means for establishing operatic 'truth' is deeply problematic. While a strictly traditionalist approach can provide a way to seemingly recreate the artistic intentions of a composer and librettist, it can also be used to justify the racism and misogyny in historical works. (pp. 104-105)

The scripture-like reverence of the score Vincent describes can be applied to both new and canonical works, as it is a facet of opera's culture and not specifically the repertoire.

Even in the workshopping process of a traditionally developed new opera, which is an opportunity to explore the piece, the hierarchal structure of the art form places the music and, consequently, the composer in a position of supremacy, even above that of the librettist. Given the small population pool of classically trained composers in the field, this limits the authentic diversification of stories that opera can tell. Adding to this conversation are sociologists Anna Bull and Christina Scharff, who specialize in studying inequalities in classical music, including those related to race, class, and gender. Their research, which is based in the United Kingdom, points to the narrow lens from which opera is most likely to be created when using traditional approaches, noting that most classical musicians in the industry come from middle-class backgrounds (2017, p. 286). The salience of socio-economic status is also reflected in the dominant social class of the audience, with those who indicate a liking for classical music being six times more likely to have a university education (2017, p. 287). Knowing who is most likely to create and consume classical music, which is

reasonable to assume extends to opera, again brings our attention to the potential limits imposed on the kinds of stories told by traditionally made operas. This understanding of demographics also points to the need for creating stories about topics that middle- and upper-class operagoers may have less exposure to so they can empathize with and learn from them and extend that situationally acquired empathy to everyday life.

With many sources of gatekeeping in the culture of opera, it is important to develop counter-structures to build spaces and projects that are more inclusive for artists and audiences alike. However, fostering this inclusion is easier said than done in a field that exhibits characteristics of high Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), which is described as the variability individuals have in their desire for their in-group to be in a position of supremacy in relation to the perceived outgroup (Pratto et al., 1994). Shedding more light on this are social psychologists Felicia Pratto, Jim Sidanius, Lisa Stallworth, and Bertram Malle (1994), whose research foci include inequality, social dominance, and moral psychology. Their research examines Social Dominance Theory, which suggests that:

> societies minimize group conflict by creating consensus on ideologies that promote the superiority of one group over others…. Ideologies that promote or maintain group inequality are the tools that legitimize discrimination. To work smoothly, these ideologies must be widely accepted within a society, appearing as self-apparent truths; hence we call them *hierarchy-legitimizing myths.* (p. 741)

As described, Social Dominance Theory fits the previously discussed assertions that Vincent (2023) makes about opera's adherence to Scripture and Tradition, which dictate how artists and audiences participate in the art form.

In addition to the repertory content, SDO has a major impact on who can identify as an opera artist. To be classified as a classical musician, especially one with the potential of a professional career, artists must have a very specific set of skills within exacting expectations that are established by tradition and canon. These parameters reflect the industry's hierarchy-legitimizing myths, which Pratto et al. (1994) explain include such ideologies as meritocracy, which implies that "some people are not as 'good' as others and therefore should be allocated less positive social value than others" (p. 741). Meritocracy reflects a form of perfectionism in Western classical music that restricts who gets

to belong in the discipline. For example, in Bull and Scharff's 2017 study, a conductor who chose to program film music in a concert still made sure to explain that "film music was not part of [the Classical Music] canon, referring to it a couple of times as 'McDonald's music' because it had 'no nutrition value'" (p. 294). Even though the conductor selected this music for performance, his comment reveals a need to maintain a sense of hierarchy.

Calling film music 'McDonald's music' reflects the conductor's SDO in relation to classical music. Pratto and colleagues' research into individual differences showed that one's level of SDO significantly predicts social and political beliefs, with high SDO reinforcing social group inequalities (1994, p. 758). The kind of denigrating comments made by the conductor can erode respect and lead to categorizing different musical genres and their creators as belonging to a less valued outgroup. Ultimately, these views serve to fortify the walls around classical music, keeping some people in and others out. Therefore, fostering high SDO in classical music environments, especially training, could have broader consequences beyond the rehearsal room.

Hierarchy-legitimizing myths in classical music dictate what can be considered in or outside of the genre and define hierarchal value categories. Bull and Scharff (2017) provide an example of this through the responses provided by their participants, young artists in a UK youth orchestra, when asked about their music genre preferences. Those who said they did not like rap or other 'urban genres,' as they described it, gave common reasons for this shared opinion, saying things like "'I just don't understand rap. I don't feel like I'm equipped to enjoy it, I can't really appreciate it', and another simply explained 'I don't get rap ... I can't listen to it'" (2017, p. 294). The authors argue that these perceptions are consequences of hierarchy-legitimizing myths, explaining that the participants used the same criteria to assess different forms of music as they would for classical music, rather than appreciating them on their own terms (p. 295).

We must recognize that the institutions of classical music help maintain the kinds of exclusionary beliefs observed in Bull and Scharff's research. As Pratto et al. (1994) explain, "institutional discrimination is one of the major contributors to the creation and maintenance of social inequalities and social hierarchy" (p. 758). This pervasive institutional discrimination is why it is imperative for post-secondary institutions and young artist programs to embrace collective methods,

such as devising, and incorporate the pedagogy of collective collaboration in with traditional teachings. By implementing collective forms of practice, new generations can be shown differences can be embraced and included.

Given the demographic limitations of the professional classical music industry and the associated hierarchy-legitimizing myths, we are reminded of the need for opera creation practices that present opportunities to expose artists and audiences to more people and stories from a wider range of experiences and skills than those typically ascribed to opera, which they may potentially empathize with. Bull and Scharff (2017) explain that "[t]he lack of understanding of rap that Adam and others describe is a classification shaped by their distance in social space from those who predominantly produce and consume urban genres" (p. 295). The inherent adaptability of devising offers an opportunity for classical artists to create alongside, not above, those from 'outside' disciplines who may have different lived experiences and creative traditions than the typical classical musician. Instead of centring Scripture and Tradition, devising centres the people on the creative team, letting their respective skills and life stories directly affect the process and resulting product.

Personal stories are powerful tools in storytelling. Devising opera creates a remarkable opportunity to create pieces inspired by co-creators' personal stories, which is made even more impactful by the process' intrinsic inclusivity. Research has shown that people respect the views of those with opposing beliefs more when the person with opposing views evidences their argument using personal experience rather than objective facts, particularly when these experiences include instances of harm or the potential for harm (Kubin et al. 2021). In the context of creating an opera about a controversial social issue, devising presents an opportunity to reach across ideological divides. The process does this more effectively by opening ways to collaborate with a wider spectrum of people rather than purely relying on researched facts that are artistically interpreted by a composer-librettist team. Underscoring this, Van Bavel and colleagues (2021) offer convincing support for creation processes that draw on the lived experiences of its team members as source material, describing that:

> A majority of people mistakenly assume that basing their beliefs about a polarized issue, like same-sex marriage or abortion, on facts will garner the respect of someone who disagrees with them. In reality, people are more likely to respect their political opponents—and even see them as more rational—if they base their moral positions on personal experience…Engaging with outgroups and hearing their first-hand accounts can bridge divides and build coalitions, especially between people with differing moral views…Such anecdotes can elicit sympathy, build respect, and at times sway the moral pendulum. At the very least they are a good place to start productive conversations. (p. 1)

Depending on their goals, it may be in the interest of a creation team to include people in the creation process who have relevant first-hand experience with story elements, rather than drawing on research alone. Of course, including people in this way is not always possible, and researched facts are still important, but since it is a common occurrence that people bring personal stories and perspectives into the process, devising offers a model that opens possibilities for social impact to a great extent.

In addition to the possible respect garnered from personal stories in devising, the process can vastly expand the operatic repertoire that audiences empathize with by welcoming a wider population of artists. It is worth noting that theatre is an effective tool in generating empathy for audience members. Rathje et al. (2021) conducted a study of 1,622 live theatre attendees, which found that attending a play can have powerful social impacts. Their results demonstrated that by attending a live theatre performance, theatregoers experienced increased empathy for groups conveyed in the performance, changed socio-political beliefs, and subsequently increased donations to charitable causes that were both connected and disconnected from the performance topics. The researchers proposed their outcomes may extend to other narrative art forms, like opera, noting that their results "suggest a broad role of the narrative arts in influencing empathy above and beyond processes specific to one modality, with narrative transportation serving as a common mechanism" (p. 9). Therefore, levels of empathy generated from a live performance have the potential to be directly and positively impacted by how engrossed audiences are by the show.

Given the previously discussed challenges opera has with appropriation, discrimination, and elitism, the possible benefit of fostering greater empathy through devising can have profound social

impacts in the sector, especially for marginalized groups. Through this process of nurturing empathy, it may be possible to lower the SDO of the opera community. Pratto et al. (1994) explain that empathetic people are also more egalitarian, noting that, "[g]iven that SDO predisposes people to believe in legitimizing myths and discriminatory policies, this would seem to make them [highly empathetic people] less likely to believe in ideologies that relegate certain persons to 'inferior' categories and to policies that disadvantage certain groups systematically" (1994, p. 755). Increasing opportunities for empathy in professional and training environments through devising may contribute to lower levels of SDO in the culture of opera. This process offers a tangible mechanism to address a host of discriminatory problems that many in the field would like to eliminate. Devising allows artists to participate in a solution to a longstanding systemic problem by increasing empathy to address the core issue (i.e. SDO) rather than using a piecemeal approach to tackle the symptoms, like appropriation and discrimination.

Chapter 3: Methods

3.1 Case study

The case study component of my research followed the devised creation of a new opera, titled *Entropy*, with an original story, libretto, and music that was co-created by a team of artists, including myself, as part of Wilfrid Laurier University's (WLU) Improvisation Convergence Ensemble (ICE). The participants include students who were enrolled in ICE for credit, along with three opera students who volunteered to be in the project, and the class's Music Director and instructor, Kathryn Ladano. Two students filled out surveys but did not sign the consent form, so their responses were not included in the data collection. Students were informed that participation in the data collection portion of the project was completely voluntary and required consent to participate. There were 25 artist participants who completed the first round of surveys, while 15 who completed two. The attrition was unfortunately due to a printing error, which resulted in not having enough surveys to distribute on the day of the show, so the numbers do not reflect the participants' willingness to participate.

The case study concluded with audience feedback from 37 anonymous respondents at the public performance of the ICE project. No demographic data was collected about these participants. Participants were invited to voluntarily participate in the study as they entered the lobby of the concert hall.

Using a pre- and post-test design, I administered the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) (Spreng et al. 2009) [see Appendix A] to the artists on the project and audience members. The TEQ has been found to be a reliable and quick instrument to assess levels of trait empathy in respondents (Spreng et al. 2009). Batles and Miu (2014) describe trait empathy "as an accurate affective insight into the feeling state of another" (p. 60). The TEQ was the ideal instrument to use for both the artists and audience participants, because it could be completed in approximately five minutes. This instrument does not ask participants to provide any identifying information or linking data, and all participants are anonymous and confidential. I assigned each set of surveys a 'case ID' for linking the pre- and post-test outcomes in the case study, and for use during coding and data analysis.

The ICE participants completed the TEQ at the start of the first day of rehearsal, before we started the process of devising, and then again on the day of the show, after they had gone through the

devised creation process. The audience participants were also asked to complete the TEQ, along with a proprietary instrument that I developed, called the Perceived Emotion Timeline (PET) [see Appendix B]. The audience TEQ results were intended to inform me of their average level of trait empathy prior to watching the show.

The PET is an untested instrument and was inspired by a study by Batles and Miu (2014) that observed individual differences in empathy of audience members while watching a live performance of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* by asking their participants to answer the Geneva Emotional Music Scale (GEMS) during the show. I opted not to use GEMS, as it offers a narrower range of emotions for the participants to select and seems to be better suited for felt emotions, rather than the emotions perceived as being created by the performance. As such, I chose to create the PET to get a more detailed depiction of the emotions that the audience members perceived from the ICE performance by allowing them to describe the emotions in their own words.

The PET asked audiences to indicate the emotions they believed were being conveyed through the performance of the opera. At the top of the show, the audience was informed that the show had been co-created from scratch by ICE, so all responses on the PET will have been mediated by that information. Using the timeline, which showed each scene on its own line with a brief scene description above, the audience members were asked to mark the sequence of emotions they remembered and/or perceived in each scene using an "x" on the timeline with the word above (ex. happy, anxious, nostalgic, sad, excited)**.** Audience members had the option to fill out the timeline during or after the performance, as per their preference. The purpose of the PET was to allow me to see if the audience perceived the emotions that the artists intended to create. Five artists, including myself, filled out the PET to create a point of reference. The artist responses were generated four weeks after the performance and the artists had both the recording and libretto to refer to if they wanted to refresh their memories.

During the case study, I conducted observational field research to test out the effectiveness of the devised process outlined in the first chapter of my literature review. I took the role of the participant as observer (Kawulich, 2005), meaning that I fully engaged with the creative process and the work of the participants while also engaging in data collection. In doing so, I ensured that the

participants were fully aware of my roles as a fellow participant and as a researcher in the setting. As a participant, I was the devising director and a member of the libretto team for the project. The data for my observations are derived from personal recollections based on my daily schedule, as my duties related to the creative process did not allow me sufficient time to take ongoing qualitative fieldnotes during the rehearsal process. Therefore, my observations in my thesis related to the roles in the setting, the creative process, the dynamics between the various participants, and descriptions of the setting are retrospective.

3.2. Interviews

I conducted 14 semi-structured qualitative interviews (n=14) with opera professionals who have participated in at least one opera creation process that they considered to incorporate devising. Of these participants, four had participated in the creative case study. Participants' primary roles in the industry included interdisciplinary artists (n = 4), singers (n = 2), composers (n = 2), instrumentalists (n = 2), those who are equally in roles of an artist and producer (n = 2), someone who exclusively worked as a producer (n = 1), and one who considered themselves a creative producer (n = 1). Unlike a producer, which is primarily administrative, financial, and logistical, creative producers are additionally artistically involved in the vision of projects and often participate as creative collaborators to guide the process and production of new works. A brief description of the demographic characteristics of the interview participants is found in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants

Demographic Characteristics	***n***	**%**
Gender		
Female	8	57.1
Male	4	28.5
Non-Binary	1	7.1
Trans Non-Binary	1	7.1
Age		
19-25	5	35.7
26-30	1	7.1
31-35	1	7.1
36-40	4	28.5
41-45	0	0
46-50	0	0
51-55	1	7.1
56-60	1	7.1
61-65	1	7.1

Race		
White	8	57.1
East Asian & White	3	21.4
Black	1	7.1
South Asian	1	7.1
Mixed-Race	1	7.1
Educational Attainment		
Some undergraduate	1	7.1
Undergraduate degree	5	35.7
Master's degree	3	21.4
Doctoral Degree	3	21.4
Artist diploma	1	7.1
Professional training (not college or university)	1	7.1

To recruit participants who were not involved with the case study component of my study, I used a purposive sampling approach to identify professional artists from across Canada who have experience with devising. The population pool of opera devisers from the Canadian sector is quite small. Therefore, many of the interviewees were previously known to me to varying degrees of association, with some I have worked with before on projects, including devised works, while others I knew through other professional settings. It was important that the research I conducted went beyond my own work. Since it is a small population pool of artists who do this work in Canada, some of the participants have worked with me on devising projects through my company FAWN Chamber Creative, which has come to specialize in collectivist methods over the years. I have worked in Canada's opera industry for over a decade, so I drew on the many strong connections that I have developed through my professional experience to help me gain access to people who I have not worked with. I used 'snowball' or chain-referral sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) to identify additional opportunities for data collection. Through these approaches, I sought to identify persons from diverse backgrounds and lived experiences to develop a more comprehensive view of the issues and topics of my study. Prior to each interview, I completed an informed consent process with each prospective interviewee, outlining the nature of the study and the rights of participants. Notably, while participants had the right to have their data anonymized, all participants opted to waive this right. This is likely the result of the artists wanting to be recognized for their artistic work in the data and their openness about the beliefs they hold on the subject of opera devising.

I developed a schedule of questions to use while interviewing both groups of opera professionals in the study [see Appendix C]. These questions were developed to provide important qualitative data exploring how devising opera can impact artists, including their perceptions of how devising has influenced their work, and the audiences who have engaged with it. All interviews, except for one, were conducted over Zoom, with only the audio recording saved. All other recording material from the calls were deleted. Interviews were transcribed and coded by me. To analyze the data, I employed an inductive, grounded theory approach, which is consistent with the established research design for qualitative social science research. Using this approach, I began analysis of the data as it became available, including identifying preliminary themes and developing new conceptual categories. My findings, therefore, informed my ongoing data collection. After completing the data collection, I further analysed the data through theoretical coding to identify the key concepts and findings from my qualitative data.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1. Case Study

Statistical analysis of the data was conducted by Dr. Mark van der Maas, Assistant Professor at the School of Social Work at Rutgers University.

The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) was distributed to audiences at the ICE performance and completed by 37 people. These 37 audience members also filled out the Perceived Emotion Timeline (PET), either completing it during or after the performance. PET results were achieved by scoring levels of agreement from the audience's PET results against the cumulative results of 5 PETs by artists who volunteered to be the control measure.

Table 2 provides an overview of the accumulated scores from each measurement. "Aempathy1" describes the scales of day-one TEQ scores, including the 37 audience members on the day of the show and 25 artists on the first day of the devising process, totalling 62 valid responses. The mean score for day-one TEQ was 48.742, the median was 49.500, with a standard deviation of 6.1209. The score quartiles include 35.000-43.750 for the lowest 25%, 43.750-49.500 for the second quartile, 49.500-53.000 for the third quartile, and 53.000-61.000 for the fourth.

"Aempathy2" in Table 1 describes the scales of final day TEQ scores of artists only, totalling 15 responses. The mean score for final day TEQ was 50.13, the median was 51.13, with a standard deviation of 6.523. The score quartiles include 38.000-45.000 for the lowest 25%, 45.000-51.000 for the second quartile, 51.000-55.000 for the third quartile, and 55.000-61.000 for the fourth.

"emo" in Table 2 describes the scales of PET scores, totalling 37 valid responses. The mean score for final day TEQ was 17.49, the median was 16.00, with a standard deviation of 9.608. The score quartiles include 4.00-10.50 for the lowest 25%, 10.50-16.00 for the second quartile, 16.00-23.00 for the third quartile, and 23.00-44.00 for the fourth.

Table 2: Scale descriptives

Statistics

		Aempathy1	Aempathy2	emo
N	Valid	62	15	37
	Missing	16	63	41
Mean		48.742	50.13	17.49
Median		49.500	51.00	16.00
Std. Deviation		6.1209	6.523	9.608
Minimum		35.0	38	4
Maximum		61.0	61	44
Percentiles	25	43.750	45.00	10.50
	50	49.500	51.00	16.00
	75	53.000	55.00	23.00

Table 3 offers group statistics for the day-one TEQ scores of audience members and artists to see if there might be a self-selected population difference between the two groups. This was done to be sure there was consistency between the different chronological times of testing each group, so that we could have confidence that the day-one scores were an indication of baseline trait empathy. The mean score for the audience (N=37) scores was 48.324, with a standard deviation of 6.4541. The mean score for the artist (N=23) scores was 49.217, with a standard deviation of 5.8926. Therefore, the TEQ scores of the audience members and artists are virtually the same.

Table 3: Day-one group statistics

	aud	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Aempathy1	Audience	37	48.324	6.4541	1.0611
	Artist	23	49.217	5.8926	1.2287

Table 4 provides the results of an independent-samples t-test, comparing the artist and audience groups for the day-one TEQ scores. The results of this test show that they are very similar and the differences between the groups' scores were not statistically significant. The mean difference between the groups was 0.8931, $t(58) = -.538$, $p = 0.296$ on a single sided test.

Table 4: Comparing day-one empathy score between groups

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
						Significance				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
		F	Sig.	t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Aempathy1	Equal variances assumed	.149	.701	-.538	58	.296	.592	-.8931	1.6588	-4.2135	2.4273
	Equal variances not assumed			-.550	50.040	.292	.585	-.8931	1.6234	-4.1538	2.3676

Table 5 describes the bivariate correlations between the studies and offers two distinct insights. The first looks at TEQ scores from the artists only (N=14) and shows a moderately positive correlation between the day-one test (Aempathy1) and final day test (Aempathy2). With a two-tailed *p* value of 0.035, there is a statistically significant increase in the TEQ test scores for artists who filled out both tests between the start and final day of the devised opera process.

The second insight compares the day-one TEQ scores of the audience members (N = 37) with their PET agreement scores. We saw there is a moderate positive correlation that was highly significant ($p = .004$) between the audience's TEQ and PET agreement scores. This demonstrated that the higher someone's trait empathy was at the time of the performance, the more their perception of the emotions conveyed by the performance aligned with the emotions the artists indicated were being conveyed by them and their colleagues on stage.

Table 5: Bivariate correlations of studies

		Aempathy2	emo
Aempathy1	Pearson Correlation	.566*	.464**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.035	.004
	N	14	37
Aempathy2	Pearson Correlation		.c
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.
	N		0

Table 6 displays the quartile grouping for the audience's TEQ scores. The scores of each quartile were compared against the PET agreement scores, as demonstrated by the mean of each group. These results showed that audience members with high TEQ scores had higher PET agreement. The large jump between scores in the second and third quartiles suggests that comparing the highest 50% of scores against the lowest 50% is reasonable.

Table 6: Audience TEQ Quartiles

Report

emo

relevel of empathy quartiles	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
1.00	12.78	9	4.410
2.00	13.56	9	8.033
3.00	20.60	10	10.200
4.00	22.67	9	11.391
Total	17.49	37	9.608

Table 7 demonstrates that there are significant differences in TEQ scores comparing the half of the audience with the highest PET scores and those with the lowest ($p < .006$). Therefore, trait empathy, as measured by the TEQ scores at the time of the performance, had an impact on the audience's levels of PET agreement to a degree that is more than chance.

Table 7: Analysis of variance (ANOVA) for audience scores

ANOVA
emo

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	654.112	1	654.112	8.577	.006
Within Groups	2669.132	35	76.261		
Total	3323.243	36			

The results of the case study demonstrate that those with higher trait empathy were able to more accurately perceive the emotions that were intentionally being conveyed on stage by the artists. We also see that the trait empathy the artists and audience members started out with were the same. Finally, although there was a small increase in empathy levels for artists from the start of the process to the final day, this was not a significant change.

4.2. Interviews

To begin my interviews, I asked participants whether they felt devising resulted in work that reflected them as people, either fully or in part, with answers that indicated 'yes, fully' (n = 10), 'yes, in part' (n = 3), and 'not sure' (n = 1). Another question asked, "Did devising impact your relationships with your colleagues?" with the majority offering insight into whether they felt closer to their colleagues because of the devising process. In response, the majority of participants indicated that they felt closer to their colleagues because of devising, noting they either felt very close (n = 7) or somewhat closer (n = 5), as a result of devising together. David Devan, an opera producer who worked in the opera industry for 34 years and has since retired from his position as Executive Director of Opera Philadelphia, was the only participant who answered this question in a way that did not provide insight into his feeling of closeness to his colleagues. Instead, he spoke about the process of becoming organizationally aligned between the operational structures of traditional opera and those of the devising artists that Opera Philadelphia partnered with during his tenure. David answered:

> Yes, and there were lots of growing pains. The devised folks don't work like opera folks. Their marketing departments don't work the same. Like, nobody works the same. So, it took over five years of multiple projects to kind of get everybody in the same place…the big organization has to shift too because I kept saying to people, 'Listen, if they did

> things our [way], why would we be partnering with people to do something different if they don't do things differently?'…If they did it the way we did it, it wouldn't be different. So, we don't work with smaller organizations to make them like us. We work with smaller organizations to make us more like them.

I also asked participants whether they would like to continue devising opera, with all but one indicating that they would, while the remaining participant indicating that she was unsure. When asked "Would you like to continue devising opera?" all but one answered 'yes' (n = 13), while one offered an answer that was neither 'yes' nor 'no.' Marie-Annick Béliveau, a singer and Artistic Director of Chants Libres who has worked in the industry for 30 years, shared an ambiguous position on her desire to continue devising opera, explaining that:

> Well, it's funny that I realized that I had, a few years ago, I had a very, I wouldn't say romantic, but maybe sentimental way of thinking of devising opera where we would be able to all sit in circle, and everyone would be treated with respect, and we would all be able to speak out and say what we want. And we would also work in that kind of safe space where everyone's allowed, you know, communicating, and no one would feel obliged… And then, as a result, I started to question it, because I realized that to work in a circle and in a constant conversation and in the consensus, listening to everyone and giving everyone the opportunity to say what they want and to express themselves, it has some downsides. Not that I think these downsides are not possible to master, but you have to be careful, because, first, consensus and trying not to put any pressure on anyone, or to not to have authority and to be able to constantly avoid any sense of hierarchy, can easily lead to something that would be a little immobile, where we won't be carrying the speech of anyone, because we don't want to choose the speech of whom we would be carrying out. So, to express things that are obvious to everyone, so that no one will be offended, no one will have the feeling that they have to endure something that they wouldn't totally agree with. And anyway, all of this makes me think that might end up being a little dull. I want to be on stage to carry a strong message, to carry a strong 'parole'- the word and the thought and the idea - a strong idea. And I'm not sure that if

> it's an idea that is common to six or eight people, it can be strong enough to be worth it. Anyway, that's just an idea.

Marie-Annick is discussing a common concern about devising, that consensus can lead to a lack of creative potency. She explains her belief that the elimination of hierarchy poses a challenge in making strong decisions as a result of the potential lack of artistic leadership. She goes on to identify why it can be harder to hear everyone's creative voices equally in the process, saying that:

> [T]he other thing I realized, I worked in the devised project that ended up being really, really good and really nice, but what was - devised process involves time, as I was saying, and to give the time to everyone to speak out and express themselves, and to take the time to listen to everyone and all the ideas and all the propositions, and to take the time to make sure that everyone feels good with everything that is happening, makes me realize sometimes that I'm not really patient, and sometimes I don't want to take the time to listen. Not that I'm not interested, but I'm not always available… [S]ometimes devised creation can lead to something that will be a little beige, a little average, and sometimes it can lead to a process that will be a little inefficient… I don't think these are impossible to—these are downsides that you can… when you're aware of them, you can work around.

In both quotes, Marie-Annick offers insight into the challenges that can arise when using a devised creation process. She highlights how creative goals and interpersonal temperament can be issues to consider when determining if devising would be a good fit for a particular person or project. Her comment also points to the necessity of understanding how to structure devised processes for creators who are more accustomed to Western classical music. This finding references the need for guidance and time in rehearsals, two of the four themes about the processes of care for opera devising that emerged in the qualitative data.

An unanticipated, overarching topic became apparent in the participants' responses to my questions. Their answers pointed to the necessity for a process of care when undergoing a devised process to create opera. The majority (n = 10) of participants discussed a need for guidance in the process, noting that the fluid nature of devising requires mechanisms in place to allow the group to

function productively, safely, and confidently. In particular, guidance helps the devising group avoid falling into patterns of hierarchy and perfectionism found in traditional opera and classical music processes, which participants expressed as serving to limit the potential of opera devising. Several participants spoke about the advantages of having a facilitating leader to guide the devised process, including opera singer and interdisciplinary creator Teiya Kasahara, whose 18-year-longcareer has spanned both traditional and new opera, as well as theatre creation processes. Teiya explains that:

> [H]aving someone who is… outside of being in the play zone, who can kind of hold the container—the facilitator, the director, the whatever you want to call it—but they can… shape and hold and guide, or the shepherd, to guide people, guide the group along, has been really wonderful.

They offer an explicit example from their experience working with a longstanding and well-respected, Toronto-based devised theatre company called Gargantua Theatre, noting what they have learned from working for the company:

> … Jackie Thomas, who's the Artistic Director of that company for 30 years, and who directs the shows predominantly and watching her hold space… just kind of letting the devisors do what they need to do to get it out of their system in a way, and to try something, be[ing] like, "Oh yeah, that's really not going to work." Or, and then you keep trying, keep trying, and then you really find that golden nugget within the pile of shit that it is.

Teiya provides a solution to the challenge presented by Marie-Annick, which is that there is a risk of the work becoming diluted in the devised process when the process lacks leadership. Here, Teiya explains that leadership can still exist in devised creation, but the role of the leader is to hold space for the group to explore freely and offer an outside eye to edit the work that the whole group generates. So, rather than functioning as an authoritative figure, the leader in a devised process is in a facilitation role to support the group in their collective endeavour.

The function of a leader in a devised process is elaborated on by Debi Wong, the Artistic Director of re:Naissance Opera in Vancouver, who is an opera singer, as well as creative producer and

director. Debi has worked in the industry for over 14 years and shares her experience as someone who is often in the leadership role of devised opera processes, saying that:

> I think that trust one is a big one and finding how to encourage people to feel like they can share their ideas, because I think there's always varying degrees of comfort, especially in classical music and opera. Think when you ask a singer, or when you tell a singer, who spent their entire career learning how to read music perfectly and produce their sounds in a very technical way and then you say 'There's going to be no scores in this production. There's going to be no scripts.'… [I]t's just a completely different thing and it's like 'You aren't going to have that. You're just going to have your ideas and our ideas, and we're going to find ways to put it together.'… [T]here's always that finding of how to get people to engage or feel comfortable enough to engage. And then, we do find that, then that's when, like, things start to get exciting. That also goes with building trust.

Debi discusses the need for guidance to help those coming from opera and classical music feel comfortable with the participatory and risk-taking requirements of the devised process, which can run in contradiction to the expectations of the work environments they are accustomed to. As she describes, it can be essential for the team to be given permission by the leader to be imperfect and be responsible for their own creative offering to the process.

Another form of guidance that several participants noted was the creation of a room agreement. This agreement is a living document that is co-created by all team members that outlines the values, needs, and expectations of the group. The creation of this agreement typically takes place on the first day of rehearsals, and can be adjusted as needed, but serves as the foundation for the way the group chooses to work together. The concept and purpose of a room agreement are outlined by Chris Thornborough, a composer and arts educator specializing in bringing young people through devised opera processes. His 11-year career includes running an opera creation program for young people at the Canadian Opera Company, and with the Griffin Trio, a highly regarded classical music ensemble in Toronto. Chris explains:

> I often, very early in the process, create what's called the Opera Manifesto, which is just a dumb phrase that I think rolls [off] the tongue for kids to remember, which is our

> compass. It becomes our sort of guiding compass, and we create that together… [I]t's how we create a safe space for the shyest people in the room to use their voice. It's how we create a space for students who are really outspoken to be able to realize they don't have to be the centre of attention, or they don't have to make us all laugh all the time. The Manifesto is just basically a way for them to come to this understanding that we can raise our voice and take up space and have that idea and hold ideas in partnership.

Although Chris is referring to his experience of creating a room agreement with children, the need for a collectively agreed upon working agreement is echoed by other participants as being an important part of the devising process. For example, Teiya articulates the importance of having a room agreement while emphasizing the time it takes to prioritize this, both to develop it and to uphold it to maintain a respectful work environment, saying that:

> [W]hen you have more people in the room who have more power, more input, it's going to take more time because of that trust building, and trust needs to happen before you can start. And I think once you kind of break that trust, or betray that trust, it's really hard to get it back. Shared values, creating room agreements, inviting certain people into the room where there is respect, there is shared values. There's a mutual understanding of how people work, what their needs are, what their accessibility needs are. Like, it's really important. And respecting those boundaries as well, like schedules or timing. Like, there needs to be an element of care that is not talked about in traditional rooms, and it needs to be like a living agreement. It needs to be like, tended to like a living organism.

Teiya's statement points to another theme that emerged concerning the process of care, which is the need for additional time compared to traditional opera creation processes where a composer and librettist are primarily responsible for new work creation.

Five participants explicitly cited more time in rehearsal as an essential consideration when planning a devised opera process. The topic of additional time came in my conversation with Fides Kruger, an experimental opera singer and interdisciplinary creator with a rich, 43-year career in experimental and collective creation. Fides explains that the "devised process creates interstitium or interstitial material for a group, for peace within story, and that's why it should take longer to develop

than two people sitting down to write an opera, which takes a long time." Fides likens the connectivity generated through the devising process to that of the human body, stating that the interstitium is "one of the most key pieces of the living organism, and it keeps people healthy. So, I think that it's real, and that there's something real that is created when people work together…with the intensity of devising that is like interstitium, or interstitial material." Fides acknowledges the added time needed to create the connective content of devising and clearly emphasizes this feature as what brings these works to life and sets them apart, making it important to prioritize time as a coveted resource.

As indicated earlier by Marie-Annick, it can be a challenge to accept the need to add time to give space to the full group to be heard and share in the creation process. In part, resistance to adding time can come from the systems already in place for traditional classical music and opera, where the rehearsal process is focused more on realizing an already written piece. Sara Constant, an interdisciplinary artist and flutist who has worked in the industry for ten years, speaks to why it can be such a challenge to prioritize time:

> I just think to really share authorship and to share a process, it takes more time than if you have someone who is making authoritative decisions, and you're following those decisions. And a lot of times, the music world is not built for the first kind of thing. The structures give you enough space to do a good job of realizing things when the creative work has already been done. And so, to engage in that creative work, and to also do it in a way where everyone is creating together, when everyone feels good before you move on, I think takes millions more hours and more resources and more facilitation, like, more of everything… But I think it's tricky because…to do the devising work from start to finish takes like seventeen times as much [time] as just putting on a show.

Sara shares the directive that devising processes require more support, through time and guidance, to allow a group to participate in a collective process of creation. Despite the potential to frame this need negatively, many participants viewed it as a hurdle that was neither 'good' nor 'bad,' and, instead, simply as a neutral fact that requires an alternative process from traditional ways of working. Rachel Krehm is an opera singer, librettists, and the General Director of Opera 5, a Toronto-based opera

company that produces both new and standard repertoire. She explains that how one values the need for more time is dependent on priorities, saying that:

> [T]aking more time isn't necessarily a con, but if you're using devising to create a final product, there perhaps is the risk that, because it's of the group, it will take longer to get to the final product than one person doing it on their own, but I think that that's just a different value. And I guess if the value is efficiency and [to be] cost effective…, then perhaps devising is a risk and a con for that, because things that are made by groups usually take longer to gel to a final product. But, I just think that I don't want to put up, like, a value on that, because, I guess it depends on your values overall and how you're working.

Rachel identifies that there are important value considerations and choices to be made when determining if devising is the strategy for a particular creation process. For example, many participants recognized that adding time is a way to value accessibility needs, shared authorship, agency, and exploration. As Rachel highlights, these human-centred benefits must be weighed against financial costs, underscoring the societal pressures of prioritizing efficiency and predictability over spontaneous organicism and variability, which are tensions found in traditional classical music and opera, and our broader society.

Time and unauthoritative guidance allow devising creators to be considered and prioritized in the creation process. This theme, which came up in my conversation with Teiya, was noted explicitly by half (n = 7) of the participants who discussed the need and/or ability for the devising process to accept people as they are. Hannah Piercey, one of the participants from my case study with ICE at WLU identified this theme as a notable characteristic of the process. Hannah, an opera diploma student who had just graduated shortly after the case study, explained that:

> I also like the fact that it conforms to… the people that are in it, and it makes room for the people who are creating it. And then we get to work with those people's strengths and/or weaknesses, depending if those are relevant, and [it] kind of just brings out the best side of any performer, composer, director, whatever it is.

Hannah shares her appreciation of devising for its potential to make space for artists to feel they can bring their full selves, knowing that they are not tasked with fitting a mould but, instead, to help create it. Teiya adds to this by explaining that people are not only allowed to be different from standard norms but also to evolve and shift as individuals through the process. They elaborate on this aspect of devising, stating that:

> [I]t really validates the human in the present moment. Me, as an artist, in the present moment, that I'm not a fixed thing; that I am, as a human, always changing and growing; that I am in flux, and being someone who is transgender as well… I think it really parallels and amplifies both. That it's like, we're alive, we're in flux, we're constantly reacting, and reacting in our environments based on what's going on in the world and our bodies… in our environments, that everything is alive and it needs tending to, and it will ultimately always be different.

Teiya's perspective as a trans non-binary artist highlights the importance of fostering creative spaces that permit artists to be present in the process while also being allowed to be present in their identities. In doing so, artists can inform the creation of new works by sharing their personal experiences, allowing the sources of inspiration to be from a primary source and, therefore, be more personal.

As discussed in my literature review, personal stories can have a strong impact on garnering respect between polarized perspectives. During our conversation, Debi articulated the importance of personal stories, sharing her belief that devising offers an opportunity to bring people together in dialogue through this collaborative process that is structured to honour and build with people's differences. She explains that:

> I often feel like a lot of our culture pushes us to either-or thinking, but when I'm in a devised process, and in deep conversation with all of these different people that we have intentionally brought together because they're bringing different lived experiences and perspectives and creative practices to the table, you get to exist in a space that is very pluralistic, and where it's OK to have different ways of thinking or doing. Where either-or is not going to push forward what we're trying to do, or change, or innovate, or tell the

> story. But rather, how do we weave many things together? And, I think, that is invaluable today.

Debi identifies that by having multiple perspectives involved in the creation of new opera, it is possible to create a more authentic diversification of the stories being told through this art form. Additionally, those stories, in and of themselves, can include an array of different perspectives that are brought together to create a cohesive narrative that has the potential to reflect the nuanced and complex lived experiences of those involved.

The final theme within devising's process of care is the consequence and responsibility that comes with artists being invited into the creative work environment as their full selves. Almost all participants (n = 13) expressed that devising is an inherently vulnerable process that requires trust to be built and maintained. Andy Drummond, who was also in the ICE case study and is a clarinettist who graduated from WLU's Community Music program after the case study, shares that the devising process can push people to dive deeper into their thoughts and ideas as the work gets formed. They explain that:

> [T]his was a really cool process - vulnerable and made me really think… [M]y analogy is like in therapy, if it's like, 'Here's this problem I've had and here's what I think about it.' Boom, done. And then a therapist is like, "And how does that make you feel?' And then you're like, 'Oh my gosh, I never thought about that.' And then you get…prompted a little more, and you're like, 'Oh, there's just so much more.' So, we would talk about things in class, or bring up a prompt, and then we would be, like, push just a little further… I do like to think that I think pretty critically, but I feel like things were always just taken a step further, of like, 'Well, what about this? And what about that?' With also the option of 'We can just throw that away too', which, like that part felt a little…I didn't like that part so much. I like holding on to my creative ideas…

Andy ends with a comment about the challenge of offering so much to the process, which, as Teiya explained earlier, invites the contribution of many ideas and requires an editing process to refine the material. A similar theme arose in my discussion with Sara Constant, whose extensive training was rooted in the more traditional practice of becoming a professional contemporary classical music

performer and who has since become more creatively involved in creation practices with sound and music. Sara echoes Andy's sentiment, saying "There are fears and doubts and emotions that I feel like…I never had to deal with as a musician, because I had to deal with the doubts of being good enough or not in a different way, but I didn't have to deal with the doubts about the validity of my ideas." Due to the high degree of vulnerability it takes to offer ideas, whether personally themed or not, it can be challenging for some people when their ideas are not incorporated explicitly into the piece. Therefore, it is important to find ways to build the trust needed to allow vulnerability to be possible. The potential benefits of building this trust are articulated by Rachel Krehm, who suggests that "getting away from being scared is a real potential in devising because you just have to do and not judge." Process facilitators can support the trust-building process by managing expectations around creative contributions early in the process, and potentially even throughout, by means of the room agreement and ongoing guidance.

The devising process can involve drawing on the shared lived experiences of the team members to generate source material for content and inspiration. Teiya, who has been involved in several devised projects in both theatre and opera, shares what they view to be a common experience of theirs with the process, saying that:

> this is not to say that I'm not asked to connect to my life and my life experience in traditional work, but it feels so much more at the surface. It feels so much more recent, in terms of, like, I feel like I can connect more to devised creations, because, generally, the stories or the subject matter is so more closely relatable to my real life, versus I really have to do a bunch of deducing… in my logic, and being like, 'Oh yeah, I guess I could, like, if I really imagined this, I could compare myself to this character in this opera at this time period in this socioeconomical situation.'

To Teiya, devising offers a more direct path from who they are as a person to the character, without having to distort their personal history to enter into a process of embodiment of their character.

Knowing that the devising process is quite vulnerable, some people prefer to work with a tight-knit group of people. Several participants expressed being selective about who they worked

with, noting a preference for people they are familiar with, either from working together on previous projects or personally. Composer and arts administrator Joseph Glaser, who has worked in the industry for ten years, explains:

> I only work with people who I'm already friends with…. [W]e were friends before, we were friends after… [C]ertainly in the *Interiority* pieces, it's pretty probing, the process, and there's a lot of trust involved. And also, again, I could only do it with people who I'm friends with because of that… [I]t's maybe grown the friendship more… [Y]ou're in a position where you have to trust each other…you can't help but get closer.

As suggested by Joseph, starting with an established relationship can take some of the burden off the process to generate a sense of trust from scratch amongst the group members.

Notably, when artists can trust their colleagues enough to be vulnerable in the devising process, many participants argued that this could, in turn, be jointly experienced by the audience, in turn. For example, David Devan, who identified vulnerability as a recurring theme across the devised projects that Opera Philadelphia produced, stated that:

> [T]here is maybe one thing that tethers them together. All the work…is highly vulnerable… like *Sky on Swings* is the name of the opera dealing with Alzheimer's. They're powerful but the vulnerability is so raw… the vulnerability in the artist and in the audience, 'cause it's part of the devised opera… So, there's a huge vulnerability… in everybody… So, I think vulnerability is actually a possible thing.

As observed by participants, such as David, vulnerability from the devising process can extend from the artists on stage to their audiences, which points to the potential for this creation method to have a broader range of impact beyond the artist community.

The themes discussed up to this point can inform the development of a process of care for a devising opera. To explore these themes further, I asked all participants to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of the devised method. Notably, many of the drawbacks serve to inform the need for a process of care in devising. However, many participants identified various benefits that can come from centring these themes as components of a successful devised opera process. The benefits offer a

worthwhile look into how devising can positively impact opera as an art form, artists working in the discipline, and their audiences.

The most common (n = 13) benefit of devising opera that participants discussed was a feeling of increased connection with the people they co-create with in this process. This benefit was conveyed by Khaleal Thompson, a Community Music percussion student who took part in the ICE case study and identified himself as being in both the second and third year of his undergraduate studies at WLU. He explained that "I find myself being more to myself... But during those moments, the devising, it brought us closer, because I got to learn a new piece of them and they got to learn a new piece of me, which was something that I really enjoyed and found interesting." Khaleal elaborated on this to offer his perspective on why he and his colleagues were able to learn about each other, saying that:

> [W]hen you're doing ensemble and sheet music, there's nothing really explained to why you do, what you do, or what you're doing there. But because we were devising, we were able to explain ourselves, of what we are and what we're doing, and why we're doing it. And because we learn those things, it's like, 'Okay, cool. Like, now I understand where you're coming from, and I can share my part, and then now let's see what we can bring together.' So, I think that's what the difference is…it's the fact that we're able to explain ourselves. While, when it comes to sheet music, you're not really explaining yourself… you're necessarily just following and just doing.

Khaleal offers a view of devising that contrasts with more traditional Western ways of making music. For example, his comments speak to the generative nature of devising that allows group members to co-compose and improvise together through a mutual dialogue. Conversely, in a more traditional process, there can be a lack of interaction between group members. This perspective was shared by Marie-Annick, who explained that in her experience in both performing as a singer and instrumentalist in operas, there can be times when you do not interact with your colleagues at all for the whole contract, noting:

> You have no idea how many shows I sang where I wouldn't be able to tell you the name of the light designer… I know his name because it's on the program… Like, you know how many times I sang at the Opera of Montreal, and then I call a friend of mine… And

said, ‘Well, I have a show tonight.’ I said, ‘Oh me too. Are you playing in the opera?’ ‘Yeah’, ‘Oh me too. I'm on stage. You're in the pit. We're in the same show.’ We don't even know. It's pretty pathetic… We don’t even come in through the same door.

In contrast, Marie-Annick says that devising allows artists to “work together as persons, instead as our functions… I'm convinced that people in the audience sense that, and they perceive that, that the show is something where some people in their entire identity are working together.” Both Khaleal and Marie-Annick emphasize that, through devising, connections can be developed, not only as a result of proximity but with the added element of people being able to bring their full selves to the process, further highlighting the need for a process of care in devising.

Many participants described learning about each other and being able to engage in the process through an authentic version of themselves in relation to increased connection to their devising colleagues. Teiya outlines this outcome, talking about their experience of:

> Just getting closer with them; really being more transparent with them, because of the innate trust building needed. Really being able to be more vulnerable with them, because we've established a shared value system in the beginning, holding each other accountable, just being able to be real, and to speak up when I need to speak up, and to be more empathetic towards them, because I feel like I can bring all of myself, and my real self, and they are as well. Versus, we are showing a shiny masked self in a more traditional place, because I don't feel as safe in a traditional context. So, there's an element of safety which I can bring my whole self in the devised context.

Teiya explains how important it is to establish a sense of trust and safety in the devising process, which they suggest is more feasible through this method than in traditional opera contexts. To this end, they highlight that bonding occurs through trust to allow people to be vulnerable and express themselves more freely, which can be supported and encouraged by the team’s co-created room agreement to establish shared values.

As discussed, many participants shared the belief that the audience can feel the sense of connection between the artists on stage and, in turn, feel more absorbed by or included in the work.

The sense of connection between artists and their audience came up in my discussions with both Marie-Annick and Fides, with Fides describing that:

> devising creates such strong bonds that when people would come to see the work that Urge did, they would go, 'Wow, you are so connected to each other and you're opening it to us and we feel brought in, in a way.' And so, even though we were doing very much female-led themes, the guys who came did not feel at all cut out of it. They felt brought into it. And that was something that was really exciting to us…'cause we felt we were telling secrets we might get in trouble for… [T]hey really felt invited and welcomed into the experience, so that was very exciting for us.

As important as it is to highlight the potential positive impacts of devising on artists, it is equally important to recognize the potential for audience members to connect to the work that results from the devising process. Audiences allow artists' messages to spread into communities and be relevant beyond purely aesthetic experiences.

Notably, eleven participants (n = 11) identified that another benefit of devising was that it offered artists a way to overcome perfectionism and the limitations that come with it, both creative and personal. Hannah described devising as a "fluid and interesting experience, because we weren't necessarily attached to a lot of things. Like, there was room and expectation for things to change… [W]e weren't looking for perfection… We were working for the art itself." Hannah expressed this as a positive highlight of her time in the devising process. To this end, many participants identified perfectionism as a challenge to overcome as an engrained impulse that is rooted in the culture of Western classical music. For example, Joseph identified how institutional pedagogy lays the foundation for perfectionism and commented on how it affected him. Regarding the weight of perfectionism, he disclosed that:

> the height was with the piece I wrote for my thesis. Because I had to, I wrote it with the idea that I was going to have to do a huge research paper on it and justify every single decision that I made in the piece, and I found that process to be so excruciating that every piece after that has been like a real process in me letting go of this… the analytical demon on my shoulder, that requires me to have every decision justified. And partly, this

> bringing improvisation more and more [into] it has been a way towards that. And like I said a little bit earlier, that the sort of worlds of my improvisation and composition have started to bleed together. And yeah, it's just been sort of letting go of the idea that the composition police will be after me if I don't have perfect structures and stuff like that. And, actually, the first piece where I really sort of let go of it was *Daffodil*, and I still think that *Daffodil* is one of my better pieces, because I let go so much of just this sort of justification.

Joseph wrote the short opera *Daffodil* through a creation process with FAWN Chamber Creative that incorporated devising in its research, and it led him to write many guided improvisation moments into the final score for the stage and instrumental performers to continue to create spontaneously through his composition. Notably, devising gave Joseph a distinct opportunity to counteract the lingering perfectionist anxieties from his Master's degree in classical composition.

Guidance is required to help opera devisers avoid the pressures of perfectionism that can get carried over from traditional classical music training and work environments. The need for guidance includes how time is used and prioritized by process facilitators, as discussed by Marie-Annick, who says:

> [A]s classical musicians, we're taught of being efficient all the time. I work with theatre people and dance people, and every time I tell them the expression 'downbeat'… it means downbeat is at 7:00. You know, it means that at 7:00, you're ready to sing. [Instead of a]t seven we sit around the table, we chat, we talk… and the stage director will always say, 'This discussion, this moment we sit around the table, is as important as who are you today. What do you come with today? What do you bring with you?', and not bar 23 at 7:00, and whoever you are and whatever you did today, you put it aside and you just sing your thing. But this chaos thing is something that I had to… accept not as being sinful or a waste of time, but as something necessary.

As Marie-Annick explains, a mindset shift is needed to think differently about the values of the group, including how time should be used to best achieve the goals of the project. Devising is discussed by several participants as being culturally oppositional to the creative processes of traditional classical

music, so devisers who are coming from that field can need more support to feel safe enough in the work environment to take chances and do things differently in ways other than what they are accustomed to. For example, Marie-Annick explained that she eventually:

> learned to appreciate this question of efficiency, where basically collective creation needs to… allow a certain amount of chaos, of work that is being perceived as not efficient. We're trying things, we're discussing, we're talking, we're just digressing… I way preferred to start from a mess that will eventually get down into more precision, instead of trying to starting from something precise… and have a bunch of precise things that won't have this big overview and this kind of coherence…

Many participants spoke about their respect and appreciation for the skill involved in traditional opera and classical music and viewed it as a separate consideration. However, the same participants identified shedding perfectionism as an essential step toward welcoming a wider scope of artists into the art form. Andy speaks to the resistance to risk-taking and doing things differently that can occur to those in traditional practice, noting that devising can make space for an alternative:

> I've had this theme come up in other classes where some students that were in the performance… were like, 'Well, we don't want to improvise. We're not good at it.…' [J]ust be this little, perfect container, almost, is the idea that I got from it. And I'm like, 'I get that'. It's something I don't appreciate it. It's just not really what I want to do. And also, it doesn't feel sustainable… [I]t feels kind of like elitism, of like you can only do music if you're the best of the best, and that's it… but wouldn't it be beautiful if everybody could create things?... [W]orking in a devised way can allow that, where it's like you still have to, obviously, have skill and hone it, but it's so much more accessible, which is huge for me.

Many participants shared Andy's views that overcoming perfectionism can welcome more people into the art form and give those in it the tools they need to push and expand their creative potential.

When the goal of a process is to be open to the uniqueness of each team member and to invite them to participate as their authentic selves, it allows people to have agency in the creative process. Indeed, most participants (n = 12) indicated that the devising process is what specifically allows

artists to exercise agency in the creation process of opera. Sara describes this, saying that "it's a combination of feeling more authorship and more agency, and at the same time, having to let go of a lot of authorship and agency, because I feel like I have more of a creative voice than, I guess, like air quotes 'normal.'" Here, Sara reveals an important compromise faced by devisers: when one gains agency in this process, they must share agency with others, so agency must take the form of input rather than control. She explains this negotiation further, stating:

> I have to relinquish a lot of control and I have to give that same opportunity to have a creative voice to everybody else in the group and make sure that we're doing something that feels right for everybody… I'm able to feel like it's more mine, and more myself, and more open and, at the same time, it's something different than I would have done if it was me.

Despite needing to compromise as part of the devising process and share in the opportunity to make creative decisions to contribute to the development of their projects, there was much consensus that devising gives them a sense of agency. In his interview, Khaleal told me that before the ICE case study, he had been interested in playing in an opera but believed that would not happen since his skills would not open that door for him. However, he said that through the devising process, he not only got to play in an opera but also participated in creating one, saying that:

> It felt like my own. Like, I feel like I could sit there and say, 'That piece was a form of my own creation, or my child.' Well, child that I share with others, but it was something that I really feel like I could say, like 'I did that!' Like, no one told me what to do…I had the creative mind and I could just do my thing.

Even while acknowledging that process of creating the piece was shared, Khaleal's expression of excitement and pride in co-creating the opera with ICE is a result of the process allowing him to contribute his ideas and make choices for himself.

In addition to leading to a sense of creative authorship, many participants also described agency as a way for artists to discover things they were not yet familiar with. For example, Fides is a highly accomplished and respected experimental singer in Canada who has been training and using

her voice in unconventional ways throughout her entire career. Despite this, she shared how devising continues to introduce to her new things about her voice, saying:

> I find that kind of opera devising very sensual and that I love. When I get to follow a really sensual thread in my body that includes all these forbidden sounds, but they're not reactive. They are sensual in a way that feels that they're growing out of a need and discovery. And almost every time, I would find a new quality in my voice, even in my late fifties, that I didn't know was there… [I]f you've been doing it since you were like twenty-six, to be fifty-six and discovering something new, you're going, 'Thank you!' That is really enjoyable.

Fides also spoke about how her approach to using her voice is deeply connected to her ability to express authentic emotions. So, it is noteworthy that after such a rich career of using and exploring her voice, devising still allows her to find new ways to express herself.

Participants also noted that when artists are supported to contribute to projects with a sense of agency, there can be unexpected creative outcomes. An example of an unexpected creative outcome arose in my conversation with Chris, who shared an instance of when the children he was devising with were asked to participate in the brainstorming process of a new opera they were creating together, saying that:

> [I]t went in a completely different direction for them… [O]ne of my prompting questions [was] 'What do you dream about?' just to fill this world a little bit. Like, flying superpowers, breathing underwater - those are some common ones, like super strength… And one student said 'home' - that was it. I was like, 'Huh, that's interesting.' And so, I asked her about it, and it was that… her family had just immigrated to Canada from Syria, and that her home no longer exists...[T]he opera just took on a different meaning after she said that to me…it humbled me, for sure, because…a lot of the devising I do with these kids is sort of like… Rafi or Mr. Dress Up or Bluey… And like that, you know, that's one word, just 'home' - turned everything around for me in terms of the tone of that opera and…what it meant for her… [Y]ou're just gonna learn something from

them and discover something about yourself and just see things a little bit differently by having gone through a collective creative endeavour.

Chris' account is an example of how, in unexpected ways, increased agency for the members of a devising ensemble can lead to new stories rooted in the lived experiences and perspectives of those involved.

An aligning theme that surfaced in my interviews, which coincides with a sense of agency, is that of shared ownership, with eleven participants (n = 11) describing this as a benefit of devising opera. The importance of shared ownership came up in my interview with Khaleal, who also expressed that the ICE case study opera "was something that we made that had a collective sound of multiple things. So, that's what kind of interested me, because it was something that was a collective sound of many different things, and it was something that was very new and very different, which I enjoy doing." Similarly, Debi Wong also highlighted the notion of shared ownership, saying, "I think there's something about how devising empowers the group of artists on the stage and that feeling of ownership and having invested your own personal creativity into something, and I just feel like the audience can feel that." She continues by describing the audience's responses to two projects that have been fully developed through devising, noting that every time they do these specific projects, they get standing ovations:

> I think the work is great, and I think what's being created it is great, but I think what's even better is that audiences and the performers, like everyone, can feel that intangible thing, that energy and that passion and that excitement. And they can see that the performers are riffing off of each other… And I think that is something that you get when everyone feels like they belong and that they have contributed to the work on stage.

Debi's interpretation of why the audiences of re:Naissance's two devised operas had such positive responses demonstrates the value she places, as a creative producer, on shared ownership for the artists they hire.

Much like the need to compromise when a group is simultaneously given the opportunity to exercise autonomy in the devising process, when there are composers on the team, it requires them to reframe their artistic role. Joseph Glaser, an experienced composer, speaks about this, noting:

> I think it brings it to this aspect that I touched on before of this de-emphasis of the composer, de-emphasis of the author that is important to me, and a shift of the sort of creative voice from generating to curating and facilitating. So, it's a bit of a different relationship to the piece…because it's not my piece, it's our piece, and I like that aspect of it… [E]ven in the way it's credited, all the *Interiority* pieces are all subtitled as being written with the performer, so they're collectively owned rather than singularly owned.

From the perspective of the co-creating singer, Fides also emphasized the importance of shared acknowledgement of creation in the devised process. She explains the challenge of navigating this when the tradition of creative authorship is given to the composer, noting that:

> the composer knows that I do things beyond just what would seem like classical singing, so they want me to come in and improvise. And when I improvise and then get the score back from them sometimes, and I will ask now - well not now because I don't think it's going to happen now, but through my 50s, I got wise and asked, 'Could I see and hear the original tapes, as well as what you ask for?' Because often, the vocal line would be so similar to what I have improvised that I didn't know why I wasn't getting a co-compositional. Only for the vocal line… I wanted that to be acknowledged.

Fides highlights the need for her to advocate for herself so that her artistic contributions are recognized, despite being in a setting where she is empowered to participate actively in the composition of a piece. Fides' concerns point to the importance of having guidance in the process to ensure traditions are not assumed to be the governing structure of the working dynamic in the group.

It is important to cultivate a climate of shared ownership to foster a sense of authorship of an opera. The benefits of shared ownership are shared by Sara, who describes how it allows more people to experience authorship of an opera, which can be an ambitious endeavour when they may not have otherwise done so. She states that opera is:

> a big project to come up with on your own, and unless I have a really strong idea or wish for that, I maybe wouldn't go there. But I think in devised work, the group shares the trust, and the group shares the burden… [I]t's like a snapshot of that group, that group's interactions in time. So, I think the sharing of the creative weight of the thing is also really special, because it means that people who might not otherwise feel able, or comfortable, or willing to make things, and to author things get to explore that idea of authorship and agency without having to do all of the things that they don't want to do, or without having the burden of being in charge.

Sara explains that devising can allow for greater inclusivity and access to the opera creation process by sharing ownership and the responsibilities that come with that, as well as the interests and skills needed to create a composer-centred opera.

Increased equity and inclusion are another benefit that was discussed by over half the participants (n = 8). For example, Debi talked about how devising can lessen the barriers to access opera creation opportunities, saying:

> [I]t offers new accessibility into the art form, because… we study music and we engage with it in all the various creative roles that we have through a foundation of musical literacy. And when we talk about what does it mean to create opera today in the 21st century, if it all hinges on musical literacy then we are down to such a small, elite group of people that can write or read or even make sense of written notation. And that is such an old way of thinking, because most musical forms today, or the musical forms that we all enjoy or to be all engaged with… they do not come from a tradition of musical literacy. They come from a tradition of jamming, improvising, listening.

Khaleal's experience in the ICE case study provides a tangible example of Debi's explanation of why devising can make it possible for more people to be involved in the opera creation process. In the following excerpt, he shares his thoughts after watching the video recording of the opera *Entropy*, that he was a part of as part of the ICE case study, stating:

> [I]t it was very amazing, and I was very surprised, because to me, I've never, I've always wanted, I always wondered what it would be like to play in an opera or in a band pit. But

> then also, because my theory knowledge isn't up there, I knew it would never be there. But because of the way we devised, it wasn't like there's theory sheets, or whatever. It was just necessary that play, play what comes to mind and what matches with what's going on. And because of that, it came out the way that we wanted to.

Learning to read and write music in the style of Western classical music is not shared equally across all members of society (McQueen, 2021). Even Khaleal, someone currently in a university program for Community Music, believes he is not equipped with the skills to confidently participate in a traditional opera process as a percussionist, despite it being something he expressed having a longstanding interest in. Through devising, he got to have that experience.

Nuha Yousuf also participated in the ICE case study. At the time of the interview, she had just completed her final year of her undergraduate degree at WLU as a singer in the classical music stream, who also specializes in improvisation. Nuha describes how devising can open up doors for different stories to be told and more identities to be authentically represented in opera, saying:

> [Y]ou wouldn't have to rely on composers to have your perfect part, because you are kind of the composer, in a way, or your group is. I think, also, in terms of representation… oftentimes it's like, 'Oh, you don't fit this role, or you're not really what the director is looking for', or whether that's how you act, or how you sing, or even how you look…And even if you're thinking about diversity… I think that you can carve out a lot of different roles. And you can also tell a lot of different stories through devising… [Y]ou can tell whatever stories that you want to tell from your own personal experience, because you're not relying on a story to already be there. And then, from a casting perspective, you're already cast. You're not looking for, 'Oh, this role would be perfect for me, because this has my specific marginalized identities.' And, it's like you don't have to fit into someone else's vision. You are, like, creating the vision.

Chris Thornborough offers an example of how devising can facilitate the telling of a story that would otherwise be unlikely to be conveyed through a traditional creation process. He shares about one of the projects he developed with children that allowed them to have their lived experiences and

perspectives conveyed through music about a complex topic that is typically only understood from the perspective of adults. Chris explains:

> We did Listen Up at a Ukrainian school, and… the first day of devising, when we met the kids, the day before was when Putin had invaded… We had planned a week or two ahead of what we were going to do. We threw it all out the window in light of the context of the situation. And for that concert, because they had created everything from scratch, it was a palpable, emotional experience that allowed them to be furious and to grieve and to have hope in a way that would not have happened if we had decided to do some hymns… [I]f we just curated that concert; how could it possibly have the same effect? So, I think the too-long-didn't-read of this is, devised work is, to me, is for the communities it serves, exponentially more powerful and enduring than, like, a traditional opera or traditional choral concert.

Chris' work with children offers tangible insight into how devising can allow opera to include a wide range of skills and perspectives into the creation process when there is guidance and a process that is structured around the individuals in the group.

With the capability of including a wide range of people in the creation process of opera, it is also possible to draw new audience members to the art form. The potential for devising to help in the development of new audiences came up in my conversation with David Devan, who noted that:

> 50% of the audience for devised work is always brand new… because we work with artists that are outside the form, so they have followings, and then we always find a co-presenter. So, Fringe Arts has been a principle one, but there are others, and they have their own following. So, it's just everyone thinks we're so brilliant. Like, we're not growing these from seed. We're importing them… so we benefit from that.

David's comments speak to how there is both a business and community development case for companies to incorporate devised operas into their season. Not only would this introduce new audience members to the world of opera, but devising can also expose the world of opera to a more diverse range of stories that are created by and for a broader population of people. Teiya shared an

example of audience inclusion from a devised opera they were a part of with re:Naissance, called *Eurydice Fragments*, that was performed in Chilliwack, British Columbia, saying:

> I feel like they can bring more of themselves to the show… [Y]ou had people shouting from the audience, 'A unicorn!' because we kept saying this metaphor of this dragon of this trans person. And like, other people being like, 'I'm trans too!', or hooting and hollering because they like what they see. They like what they hear on the stage, versus 'Wow, that was an amazing high note. That was an amazing coloratura passage.' and saying, 'Bravo!' or 'Brava!'… I think people who want to, who are curious about the world, and want to be challenged, but also just like, want to see their life reflected on stage, or their contemporary culture reflected on stage, like they're hungry for that… I don't need to censor myself, as well, when I'm talking to audience members or patrons during these shows, before these shows, after these shows, because I'm just like, 'This is what you're going to get.' You see what you're going to see. You know, this is who I am, versus I must be really professional and be careful with how I talk and how I present myself, and how I look and how I stand.

As Teiya's example conveys, since artists are directly involved in the devised creation process, operatic stories and ways they are told can more readily reflect the lived experiences of those in the group. With this mechanism of inclusivity, audiences have the opportunity to connect with more types of stories through opera, and to either see themselves reflected on stage or learn more about, and from, those who have differing lived experiences from their own.

In summation, the results of my qualitative research revealed that there are many benefits to using devising methods to create opera, including fostering connection for both artists and audiences, a greater sense of agency and shared ownership for artists, helping artists overcome perfectionism, and expanding opportunities for increased equity and inclusion in new opera for more artists and audiences, alike. My interviews also revealed that to safely and effectively gain access to these benefits, devised opera processes must include a process of care. The key components of care that were identified by the participants for devised opera creation include a need for guidance, more time in active rehearsal, acceptance of the people on the team and what they bring to the table, and an

acknowledgement of the inherent vulnerability the process requires and the consequential need for trust. The data shows that these two pillars of the benefits of devising and process of care, are highly intertwined and should be considered together.

Chapter 5: Discussion

My research used a mixed methods approach to understand better how devising opera relates to empathy for artists and audiences. I used a research-creation process where I worked with a group to devise a new opera and utilized quantitative methods to assess levels of trait empathy in the artists at the beginning of the process and then again at the end. I also studied the audience who attended the performance of the devised opera, assessing their levels of trait empathy that they came in with to see the show, as well as documenting the emotions they perceived as being created by the performance. Additionally, I conducted semi-structured, qualitative interviews of artists with some form of experience with devising methods for opera, with four participants sourced from the creative case study. The qualitative and quantitative results come together to paint a more holistic picture of the empathetic potential of devised opera, along with the responsibilities and key considerations associated with working within this creation method.

The case study results showed us that undertaking a devising process may positively impact the artists contributing to the project, although this finding was not statistically significant. Therefore, I cannot say, with certainty, that the devising process itself can be a tool to nurture greater empathy in the artists who engage in this creation method. Conversely, I did find a significant, positive correlation between the audience's trait empathy score and the accuracy of responses to their perceived emotions from the performance. This finding points to the fact that audiences can empathize with an opera that is co-created by 26 people through a devised process. Therefore, an audience does not simply empathize with the artistic interpretations of emotions established by a composer/librettist source. Rather, they can simultaneously empathize with a group of people who have a wide array of personal and artistic perspectives and skills. Importantly, this result also demonstrates that emotional clarity in opera can be achieved by a large group of creators, with empathetic accuracy from the audience. Another understanding the data points to is that pre-existing individual levels of empathy held by audience members directly impact levels of alignment between the artists' intentions and the audience's interpretations. This finding is important as artists cannot control for pre-existing levels of empathy amongst audience members. One must assume an audience will always include a wide spectrum of trait empathy, leading to inevitable subjectivity in artistic

interpretation. It would also be reasonable to say that the empathetic scores of the case study audience were normative for the community the artists belong to since the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) scores were the same for both artists and audiences.

The quantitative results underscore the possibility of devising to accurately convey emotional information. This finding is an exciting prospect and calls on more artists to create opera in this way to tell stories that audiences can empathize with—a call to action that comes with an associated responsibility that is identified in the qualitative results. In my interviews with artists, the need for a process of care was apparent, which respondents connected to a series of benefits, including audience connectivity, that can result from a devised process that takes care into consideration. The most frequently discussed themes that can help an artist build their own process of care were a need for guidance, more rehearsal time, acceptance of the people on the team and their respective abilities, and a need for trust to be built amongst team members, due to the high degree of vulnerability required of co-creating artists. However, this is not an exhaustive list of the care elements discussed by participants or those that are reasonable to implement in a devised creation process. Since 13 of the 14 participants spoke to the vulnerability inherent to the devised opera process, it makes sense that the same number of people said they felt the devised operas they were a part of creating reflected themselves, in some way. The participants likely expressed feeling represented in the work because the team of artists on devised projects often serve as crucial source material for the work, and their lived experiences influence the creative direction of the final product.

All but one participant also said they would like to continue devising. This response is likely the consequence of the identified benefits that outweigh the challenges of the process. The one person who did not answer affirmatively provided an ambiguous response that pointed to several commonly identified challenges, which many other participants shared that a care strategy could help to mitigate. The most discussed advantages of a devised opera process include a strong sense of connection, for both artists and audiences, to the work and each other; the ability to exercise agency to a greater degree than typically experienced in traditional opera processes; offering a realistic alternative to perfectionist expectations and alleviating the stresses and limitations imposed by that mindset; the feeling of ownership of the created piece that is shared with all members of the group; and expanded

potential for equity and inclusion, so to allow a broader population to take part in creating new operas than traditional creation processes allow.

Devising provides a tangible counter-structure for opera creators to overcome characteristics of high social dominance found in classical music that make it challenging for opera to become more inclusive and diverse in its content and community. Given that high Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) reinforces social inequality (Pratto et al. 1994), there is an immense amount of value in finding ways to counterbalance the SDO of opera. Some of the hierarchy-legitimizing myths that impact the SDO of opera and its creation process were reflected in my discussions with participants. A significant myth that opera devising addresses is that of perfectionism, which governs how artists prioritize the use of time, places strict expectations on artists' skillsets and their levels of virtuosity that allow them to participate and sets parameters around what aesthetically constitutes being called an opera so that it fits within the prescribed musical structures of the genre. Devising invites people to be different, which runs contrary to an art form centred on Tradition and Scripture.

As Vincent (2023) explains, the deep roots of Tradition and Scripture that underpin the culture of opera, for both audiences and artists, sustain the hierarchy-legitimizing myths that make it challenging to approach the art form in ways that are non-conformist, even for artists who want to explore these methods. Many participants discussed the challenges classical music artists face when asked to reframe their approach to the rehearsal and creation processes to engage in the devised process effectively. Inherent to devising, artists must let go of their need for control and predictability and open themselves up to the risks that come with taking responsibility for the work being created. As a result, this method can bring about feelings of fear, vulnerability, and anxiety. Fortunately, the participants also offered much insight into counteracting these very reasonable challenges.

A list of benefits and their associated need for a process of care emerged from my conversations with the artist participants. Many participants also described devising as a viable and attractive path forward to lowering the SDO of opera. Given the power that hierarchy-legitimizing myths have in opera, moulding the art form's pedagogy, careers, and patron communities, an equally present and strong source of facilitative guidance is needed. Facilitation of the devised process offers

a structural stand-in to help artists feel a sense of security in an otherwise malleable and inclusive creation process that encourages and makes space for difference, exploration, and connection.

Interview respondents also shared what they believed to be challenges of devising opera, which helped to reveal the need for a process care. Some of the challenges identified by respondents include:

- A high degree of vulnerability, both personally through emotional and intellectual investment, and professionally due to so much being unknown, leading to uncertainty regarding whether the work will reflect well on them. These concerns put people at risk of feeling anxious, scared, and over-exposed.
- The necessity for much more time in active rehearsal than typically needed for a traditional process. This led some respondents to believe it made the creation process less cost effective, although there was some disagreement on this budgetary topic between responses.
- A lack of control over the creative ideas people bring to the table, particularly the challenging feelings that can come up when their ideas are not used, or they are changed in a way where they no longer feel like their original idea.
- Unpredictability in the creative process and final product.
- A sense of pressure to find a way to represent all voices equally.
- A feeling that creative potency can be muted in settings where creative consensus is expected.
- The challenges and tension associated with having some form of leadership in a process that is group oriented.
- A high degree of mental and physical exertion.
- The need for all members to buy into the process, and how a process can be derailed when this does not occur.
- The necessity of having skills that are not usually present in traditional classical music training, like conflict management, facilitative leadership, and collaborative improvisation.

These challenges were most often presented as things to be considered when planning an opera creation process that might use devising, with many respondents also noting that these can be

overcome. Despite the challenges, in all but one case, respondents said they would like to continue devising, which speaks to the overall benefits of this approach.

When proposing bold systemic change, as offered by devising, it is important to recognize SDO as a possible obstruction that needs to be counteracted to mitigate its pervasive effects while enacting change. For opera, Tradition acts as a barrier to the progressive action needed to increase diversity and inclusion despite there being a strong desire to do so from within the community. Not only are they identified by participants as benefits of devising, but diversity and inclusion are also integral to expanding the empathetic potential of opera's repertoire.

The data from my research shows that an audience is capable of empathetic accuracy when a group creates a piece through a devised process. Furthermore, the positive correlation of the PET scores with the audience's TEQ scores implies their responses are not the result of mentalizing but, rather, an indication of empathy. This means that they are not simply making emotionally uninvolved interpretations of the emotions being conveyed by the artists (Singer and Decety, 2011). Therefore, the implication is that the audience members empathized with the full group of people, with a mix of classical and non-classical musicians and different life experiences, who co-created the music and libretto of the opera through a devised process. This finding strengthens the argument for finding ways to make the practice of opera devising a more common practice in the industry since it allows audiences to empathize with the creation of a great many more people than simply a composer and librettist.

Most interview participants expressed feelings that the devised operas they were a part of reflected them on a personal level, either wholly or in part. Notably, many participants also shared their belief that audiences feel a greater sense of connection to devised work. Some participants cited increased vulnerability for audiences that is shared with artists and, thus, built into the work; others noted audience members getting excited about shared identities they do not often see represented on stage; and some participants felt that when artists are performing with a greater sense of connection to each other, this is felt by the audience and draws them into the performance more. Furthermore, almost all artists expressed feeling an increased sense of connection to their colleagues during the devised process. With the elevated connection between artists, the personal reflection of the artists in

the work, and the possible resulting increase in connection for audiences, it is important to recognize that audiences would be connecting to a community of artistic ideas that convey stories and the representations of emotions that are formulated by an array of non-homogenous perspectives.

Participants also noted that when audience members were made aware that the artists on stage participated in the creation of the piece, their investment and excitement seemed to be elevated, in contrast to traditional opera. These elevated feelings may be related to research indicating that people respect personal experiences more than facts when engaging in oppositional discussions, and this is increased when the content is related to instances of harm, which many operas are thematically rooted in (Kubin et al., 2021). The research furthermore indicates that respect for personal experiences results from understanding someone's innate need to avoid personal harm, which requires a degree of either mentalizing or empathizing with the person conveying the message. The same study also describes the potential impacts of devising for audience's ability to engage with operas that address topics that may be deemed controversial, particularly when the audience is told that the piece was co-created by people with personal experiences that informed its creation. My results also align with Rathje and colleagues (2021), whose research demonstrated audience members' empathy was positively correlated with their feelings of being transported by a live piece of theatre. Evidence of this effect presents an interesting prospect that devised opera may be an effective tool in generating audience empathy for outgroups if they are represented on the creation team of a project, particularly performers, since that would better reflect a first-person perspective. Of course, devised opera used in this way increases the level of vulnerability for the artists and emphasizes the need for strategies that centre care in the devising process.

As with any study, there are some limitations to my research. Although my qualitative and quantitative samples are relatively small, I must note that the community of artists who actively practice opera devising is very niche. I focused my research on Canadian artists because that is the community I am a part of and familiar with. However, conducting interviews with artists from other countries would be advantageous in obtaining a more diverse perspective. Artists from different countries will have distinct experiences, cultural considerations in collective work, and lessons learned. Canada has a small opera community, especially compared to those in Europe, and an even

smaller and less established community of artists who explore alternatives to traditional opera creation. Extending the scope of future research beyond a single community would offer even more insight. With that said, I believe my data includes a significant representation of the population of artists in Canada who work with devised methods to create opera, although not all, as there were some artists who I am aware of whom I was unable to coordinate with. Similarly, since this is a largely underrecognized approach to opera creation, there may be artists who I am unfamiliar with who work in this way. To combat this, I would conduct an outreach campaign for future studies to invite people to speak to me in attempt to access more artists outside of my professional network.

Furthermore, a larger sample size would entail more statistical power and a greater ability to investigate the artist empathy scores, thus providing more clarity around the increase in TEQ scores observed in the case study artists between the beginning and end of the devising process. My initial sample was already small, but an unfortunate administrative error resulted in the high degree of attrition seen in the final TEQ artist responses, as there were not enough tests to distribute to the entire ensemble. This error resulted in losing out on almost half of the possible responses that could have offered more insight into how the devised opera process impacted artist's levels of empathy. Ultimately, the artist's TEQ result was not statistically significant, and a larger sample size would have made this more reliable. Future studies would benefit from analysing the changes in artist empathy scores across multiple devised opera processes, so there could be information gathered from different processes since every team and process will differ. This approach would also provide a higher degree of saturation, which would help to disambiguate the results from being specific to a particular team and project, which is the case for my case study, and offer a better look at the devised process itself.

My research suggests that devising opens doors for bringing in more people into the creation process of opera and, consequently, can lead to greater authentic diversity in the kinds of stories told through the medium. The results also indicate that devising can present audiences with an opportunity to empathize with a broader spectrum of stories and people than typically possible with traditional opera. With that prospect, it must be recognized that this proposed solution to some of opera's social dominance issues comes with a responsibility to take greater care in the process. There must be

mechanisms to ensure artists are respected and able to fully participate with a sense of safety, which necessitates a process of care, as suggested by my results.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Opera professionals stand to learn much from devising, with even greater experiential benefits for audiences. As such, developing a pedagogical approach and community of practice for devised opera is necessary. The outcomes can be achieved by teaching devising methods to artists who are still in the early stages of their training and/or careers, thus creating legitimacy and, eventually, proficiency. Training of this kind would necessitate teaching artists a method of working that prioritizes collective care, emphasising facilitative leadership skills and strategies in process planning that fosters trust and empowers team members to participate in a way that welcomes their lived experiences and identities. This training would require a shift in how productivity is taught in the opera creation process, emphasizing a greater investment in the time spent in the active creation process so it can be responsive to and inclusive of a wider spectrum of artistic collaborators.

Incorporating devising practices into opera's pedagogical approach would have ripple effects on the professional world regarding inclusivity and diversity in its community and the stories told by artists. It would create a foundation for long-term cultural change by addressing the industry's Social Dominance Orientation, which creates roadblocks when attempting to solve the pressing social issues in the art form and industry. Devising can offer an alternative option to creation that can coexist with traditional opera and possibly even influence it through leading by example. Devising demonstrates a way for opera to allow its artists to have a greater sense of agency and shared ownership of the pieces they perform and, as my findings demonstrate, can build a strong sense of connection for both artists and audiences. By overcoming the need for perfectionism in the creation process, devising offers another tool for those in the industry to increase equity and inclusion for the opera community.

Understanding devising's potential beyond the aesthetic experience of art, and thinking of it as an empathetic process, allows devised opera to be both valued for its social consequence and positioned as a viable option for industry-wide change. This perspective would provide a foundation for artists and pedagogues to build effective and intuitive creation processes with the potential to help address some of the systemic problems that often seem like immovable forces in traditional opera environments, like cultural appropriation, elitism, ablism, and identity-based discrimination. For devising to impact the industry, it needs to be taught in post-secondary institutions to allow it to

become a viable artistic career path in opera and grow the professional community to a size of critical mass. My research offers a place to start and a strong argument for implementing these practices.

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APPENDIX A:

The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (Spreng et al. 2009)

Below is a list of statements. Please read each statement *carefully* and rate how frequently you feel or act in the manner described. Circle your answer on the response form. There are no right or wrong answers or trick questions. Please answer each question as honestly as you can.

1. When someone else is feeling excited, I tend to get excited too
2. Other people's misfortunes do not disturb me a great deal
3. It upsets me to see someone being treated disrespectfully
4. I remain unaffected when someone close to me is happy
5. I enjoy making other people feel better
6. I have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me
7. When a friend starts to talk about his/her problems, I try to steer the conversation towards something else
8. I can tell when others are sad even when they do not say anything
9. I find that I am "in tune" with other people's moods
10. I do not feel sympathy for people who cause their own serious illnesses
11. I become irritated when someone cries
12. I am not really interested in how other people feel
13. I get a strong urge to help when I see someone who is upset
14. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I do not feel very much pity for them
15. I find it silly for people to cry out of happiness
16. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards him/her

Scoring Item responses are scored according to the following scale for positively worded Items 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 13, 16. Never = 0; Rarely = 1; Sometimes = 2; Often = 3; Always = 4. The following negatively worded items are reverse scored: 2, 4, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15. Scores are summed to derive total for the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire.

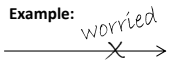
APPENDIX B:

Perceived Emotion Timeline – audience

Please complete the following instrument during or immediately after the show. Circle when you filled this out: DURING / AFTER

Please indicate the emotions you believe are being conveyed during tonight's opera. Using the timeline below, mark the sequence of emotions you remember and/or perceive in each scene using an "x" on the timeline with the word above (ex. happy, anxious, nostalgic, sad, excited)**.** There are no 'right' or 'wrong' responses. We are only seeking your honest opinions. **Your responses are completely subjective and anonymous**. Once you are done, please drop off your completed timeline in the box in the hallway. Thank you for your time.

Example:

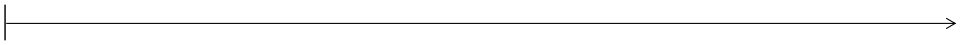


Scene 1 - *Entropy floats in an almost empty void.*

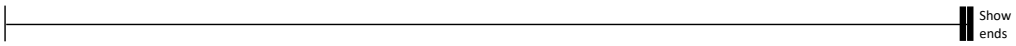
Scene 2 - *Entropy wakes up in a new world and meets Twin 1 & Twin 2. Together, they discover a black hole.*

Scene 3 - *Entropy and the Twins enter the black hole.*

Scene 4 – *Entropy and the Twins fall out the other side of the black hole and find themselves in a dark cave.*



Scene 5 – *The trio meet Concordia, goddess of harmony, and they are faced with a decision to stay or leave.*



APPENDIX C:

Qualitative Artist Interviews:

1. How old are you?

2. What is your gender?

3. Were you born in Canada?
    a) If not, where were you born?
    b) How old were you when you came to Canada?

4. Some people might identify as coming from a certain racial and racialized background. For example, someone might say that they identify as Black, South Asian, White, Arab, or from a mixed or multi-racial background. If someone asked you that question, how would you identify? You can also say that you prefer not to answer.

5. Some people may also identify as coming from a certain ethnic or cultural background. For example, someone might say that they identify as Brazilian, Japanese, Jamaican, Métis, Inuit, or from a mixed or multi-ethnic / cultural background. If someone asked you that question, how would you identify? You can also say that you prefer not to answer.

6. I want to ask you about your educational background. Are you in school now?
    a) If yes, what grade or year are you in?
        i. What is your program of study or major?
    b) If no, what is the highest level of education that you've completed?
        i. What was your program of study or major?

7. Have you undertaken other forms of training outside of school?
    a) If yes, what type of training have you undertaken?
    b) Has that training impacted your work in opera and/or new music? If so, how?

I now want to ask you about your work and role in the fields of opera or new music, or areas that intersect with these fields.

8. Can you tell me about your work in the industry:
    a) What is/are your role(s) or occupation(s) in the industry? What kind of work do you do?
    b) How long have you worked in the industry? Has your role or occupation changed in that time? If yes, how?
    c) Is your role full-time or part-time?
    d) Do you do other work, creative or otherwise, that you do not identify as your primary role in the industry? If so, what type of work are you involved with?

I now want to ask you about your experiences and perspectives related to working with a devising process.

9. Describe the devising process(es) you have worked with.
    a) If there is more than one, how did the processes differ and why?
    b) What themes were addressed?

10. What were some of the pros and cons of working in a devised method? Why do you feel this way?

11. How did devising affect the final product?

12. How were you first exposed to devising opera and/or why were you drawn to it?

13. What are some of the things you appreciated and/or enjoyed most about devising?

    a) Why are those things important to you?

14. What do you think was unique to the devised operas you have been a part of compared to traditionally composed opera? Please explain.

15. How did devising impact your relationship to the piece?

16. Did devising impact your relationships with your colleagues? If so, how?

17. Did you feel like the resulting work reflected you as a person, either fully or in part? If so, how?

18. How do you think the audience connected to the devised opera(s) you have been involved with? Why do you feel this way?

19. Would you like to continue devising opera? Why or why not? Can you tell me why you feel this way?

20. How do you think the industry would be affected if more people used devising methods in creating opera?

21. That's all the questions I have for you today, but is there anything else you would like to tell me about the topics we've been discussing or something else that you would like share?

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Certificate #:	**STU 2023-124**
Initial Approval:	**09/29/23-09/29/24**
Amendments:	**Amendment approved: 02/21/24**
Renewals:	
Current Approval Period:	**09/29/23-09/29/24**

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ETHICS AMENDMENT APPROVAL

To: **Amanda Smith - Graduate Student**
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From: Alison M. Collins-Mrakas, Director, Research Ethics
(on behalf of You-ta Chuang, Chair, Human Participants Review Committee)

Date: Wednesday, February 21, 2024

Title: **Exploring Devised Opera Methods & their Impacts on Empathy for Artists and Audiences**

Risk Level: ☒ Minimal Risk ☐ More than Minimal Risk

Level of Review: ☒ Delegated Review ☐ Full Committee Review

With respect to your research project entitled, **"Exploring Devised Opera Methods & their Impacts on Empathy for Artists and Audiences",** the committee notes that, as there are no substantive changes to either the methodology employed or the risks to participants in and/or any other aspect of the research project, a renewal of approval re the proposed amendment(s) to the above project is granted.

Any further changes to the approved protocol must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process by submission of an amendment application to the HPRC prior to its implementation.

Ongoing research – research that extends beyond one year – must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research ethics (ore@yorku.ca) as soon as possible.

For further information on researcher responsibilities as it pertains to this approved research ethics protocol, please refer to the attached document, **"RESEARCH ETHICS: PROCEDURES to ENSURE ONGOING COMPLIANCE".**

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at: acollins@yorku.ca.

Yours sincerely,

Alison M. Collins-Mrakas M.Sc., LLM
Director,
Office of Research Ethics