

CLASSICAL MUSIC FUTURES PRACTICES OF INNOVATION

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5. The Voice Party – A New Opera for a New Political Era

Lore Lixenberg

'Fed-up with the blah blah blah? VOTE VOICE FOR SOME LA LA LA!!

THE VOICE PARTY IS A PARTY FOR VOICES! And the only political party that promises you nothing at all.'

—The Voice Party election slogan 2019



Fig. 5.1 Lore Lixenberg, The Voice Party election flyer for the 2019 UK Election (2019) © Lore Lixenberg.

The Voice Party is a political party and also an experimental opera, born out of the trauma of Brexit in 2016 and launched in Berlin at the Hamburger Bahnhof during the German elections of 2017. It also stood in the UK General Election in 2019, in the constituency of Stoke Newington and Hackney North, against Labour MP Diane Abbott among others. The entire election campaign was conducted in song and in vocalisations, including the hustings, election-night interviews, door-stopping and interaction with the public generally. The leaflet that was handed out by the voice party had, on one side The Voice Party logo and manifesto, while the other consisted of manuscript paper where people were encouraged to write music, a song, a drawing, a recipe or a poem, or anything they wanted to express in whatever form that came to them.

What then is The Voice Party, and what was the inspiration to start a new political party? What is it about the mainstream and even the alternative political parties that leaves one with the feeling that there is a big void at the heart of politics and society and how does this relate to music-making? Arguably, this metaphysical vacuum could be the result of music and the arts in the UK being for some time in deep crisis. The state of the arts can be seen to reflect society as a whole and the overall health of the society in many different ways. There are drastic cuts to free music education in schools, and professional musicians are legally robbed by unscrupulous streaming platforms. Many music departments in Higher Education have been axed completely or had their funding cut by a massive fifty percent.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has also revealed seismic inequalities and stratifications in our societies that were already exacerbated by the financial crash of 2008 and a ten-year programme of brutal austerity. Music and cultural activities generally have always been regarded in the UK as a frivolity, something outside the mainstream of society, not to be taken seriously, financially non-viable and a soft force not worthy of serious study. Indeed, even as far back as 1914, Oscar Schmitz referred to England rather unflatteringly as 'Das Land ohne Musik' (The Land Without Music).² By other countries in mainland

1 Bethan Staton, 'Funding for arts courses and London universities to be slashed', *Financial Times*, 20 July 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/937ee941-a808-40ac-b83e-429d0a7ae5d8>

2 Oscar A. H. Schmitz, *Das Land ohne Musik: englische Gesellschaftsprobleme* (Munich: G. Muller, 1904).

Europe, the UK has also been called a nation of shopkeepers; arguably that should now be changed to a nation of online shoppers.



Fig. 5.2 Frederic Acquaviva, *The Election Night Count*, Hackney Britannia Centre
© Lore Lixenberg (2019).

Rishi Sunak, Chancellor of the Exchequer,³ stated rather surprisingly ⁴ that as music is a financially non-viable activity, musicians should seek alternative income streams. This is in spite of the fact that in 2018 alone, music as an industry added 5.2 billion pounds to the national purse. It would be useful if the current government at the very least knew the price of everything and the value of nothing, but they don't even seem to know that. However, more worrying is the huge disconnect between political and everyday life in the UK and, following on from that, everyday life and music and creativity. It's as though we have bred a nation of cap-doffing, class-conscious super-consumers with

3 Correct at the time of writing, though Rishi Sunak has gone on to become Prime Minister.

4 ITV, 'Covid: Rishi Sunak says people in "all walks of life" are having to adapt for employment', 6 October 2020, <https://www.itv.com/news/2020-10-06/rishi-sunak-suggests-musicians-and-others-in-arts-should-retrain-and-find-other-jobs>

an imprisoned slave mentality who have been taught to know their place and stay there and who don't really view themselves, their lives or communities as inherently creative. In fact the idea of an autonomous organic community, where different people work together for the common good, seems to be actively discouraged, resulting in an increased sense of isolation and polarisation. The result of this is that many people don't see themselves as creators, and can only relate to music and cultural activity as customers. The relationship to music is commodified along with everything else; music is once again something to be bought and passively ingested. Understandably, if you have been running around an Amazon warehouse all day, obliged to urinate into a plastic bottle because your employer even sees attending to basic bodily functions as a time-wasting drain on the corporate purse, the energy and will to create is bled out of the individual.⁵

In order to satisfy the needs of an exhausted populace, genres broadly referred to as pop and folk music, and other styles of vernacular music, have been appropriated by government-funded institutions, whereas these styles used to be rebellious alternatives outside the institutions. It's hard to imagine for instance, Jimi Hendrix considering something like a Snape Malting Residency or a PRS-funded album launch or ACE 'Develop Your Practice', to create their sound. Groups like Rudimentary Peni and The Dead Kennedys thrashing through their ugly, raw, beautiful and rude sound also spring to mind. There is certainly a general lurch toward a more soothing, bland, unchallenging, pre-chewed music.

With this in mind, as both an operatic form and a political party, how would The Voice Party conduct itself? Whilst it is arguable that world politics have become absurd and operatic enough already (we have the example of the Trump administration and also Vladimir Putin, who hired an experimental theatre director, Vladislav Surkov, with the express intention of encouraging a post-truth era: confusing, manipulating and exhausting world populations), arguably art, music, operatic structure and life have become entwined in a duplicitous, twisted way. It is important then that The Voice Party remedies this in

5 Colin Drury, 'Amazon workers "forced to urinate in plastic bottles because they cannot go to the toilet on a shift"', *Independent*, 19 July 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/amazon-protests-workers-urinate-plastic-bottles-no-toilet-breaks-milton-keynes-jeff-bezos-a9012351.html>

an authentic and sincere way, utilising operatic and quotidian structures to infuse each other and explore different modes of musical creation by putting musical creativity at the very centre of politics and daily life.

This being said, The Voice Party also has its own dedicated Twitter bot farm, utilising social media to create a musical disseminating structure. A dedicated Twitter developer account was set up @TheVoiceParty1 (theVoicePartyOperaBotFarm) as a bot account that only follows @10DowningStreet and @BorisJohnson,⁶ and automatically answers these accounts in opera, or rather heightened vocalisations. The bot is linked to a SoundCloud account that acts as a repository of bot material. Created purely for Twitter, this store of material is used by the main protagonist in this Twitter opera, the 'Twitter Troll'. These trolls usually hide behind anonymous Twitter handles and are often created in bulk for operabot farms. Whether the troll is human or a programmed bot, they can be seen as vengeful (or simply mercenary) characters who amplify extreme political thought and fake news of many different persuasions. There is a parallel between the function of these botfarms and that of the chorus of the ancient Greeks, whose function it was to echo and comment on the main action unfolding onstage, the actors being anonymised by the use of masks. The plot is very simple: every time @10DowningStreet or @BorisJohnson tweets, the bot replies in opera. Some of the bot content was built by simple voice-multitracking and collage techniques, some of the bot 'arias' were made by AI taking on the distinctive voice of Boris Johnson and autogenerating material. There are two sorts of bot aria; one is a simple repeated module such as 'Liar' and 'Fuck You', that are formed of multi-tracked vocal loops. The second structure is composed in response to a particular event, such as 'Not Father Christmas', which is a retort to Boris Johnson's remarks in the autumn of 2020 (the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic) that we would all have a normal family Christmas and how important that is. These utilise collage and also, in some cases, AI voice analysis of Boris Johnson's speeches to pick out repeated vocal tropes and tics and interactions such as 'ping pong', 'wowzers' and various Churchillian quotes. This opera uses Twitter as its stage, in the way Goffman states that in the 'theatre play where

6 At the time of writing, Boris Johnson was Prime Minister; he was replaced in 2022 by Liz Truss whose premiership lasted forty-nine days, after which Rishi Sunak took the position.

I conduct a performance, I play a role' only showing the 'front stage and not the backstage.'⁷ Social media, especially Twitter, is in some ways diametrically in opposition to Rancierian thinking as presented in *The Emancipated Spectator*, or Debordian critique, as Twitter is in some ways the heart and soul of exteriority. 'Theatre accuses itself of rendering spectators passive and thereby betraying its essence as community action'.⁸ Twitter users often mask themselves behind obscure usernames. In fact Twitter bots always do, and users who use their actual names rarely present a full and authentic picture of themselves. Social media platforms have been utilised to wreak havoc on democracies and the idea of political truth. There is a dichotomy and dramatic tension between a platform that purports to be representative of the everyday, encouraging people to connect via microblogs and tiny interactions, but is in fact the opposite of that, often creating an alternate reality.

As an operatic structure, The Voice Party proposes to subvert Twitter's propensity to twist the truth and go beyond the mere representation of character and situation, something one also often finds in contemporary opera as well as Twitter: characters are continually presented to us in opera houses as a parade of quasi trans-humanist-pre-post-cyborg avatars, extensions of neurotic backstories inherited from redundant social structures designed to keep people in their place. The Voice Party proposes opera and operatic character as pure, truthful embodiments of oneself, of fantasies and creations, and of present and future potentialities, completely free of these outmoded, patriarchal, colonialist paradigms. We as humans could become as free as the birds. This would automatically address ideals of inclusivity as this quality is inbuilt into the very structure of the piece.

The Voice Party would completely reverse the current situation where musical activity occurs on the sidelines of society, grateful for any crumbs of financial support that fall from the table, for which it must conform and castrate itself to receive. Music would proudly stand at the very centre of all decision-making in all aspects of daily life, and politics would be informed and guided by the beautiful, elegant laws of music,

7 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956), p. 53.

8 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliot (London; New York: Verso Press 2009), p. 7.

unencumbered by corporate and state interference. The Voice Party, as a participatory operatic political structure, asks what the outcome would be if participatory musical performance principles were actually placed at the centre of daily life and politics. Needless to say, The Voice Party would prioritise music lessons, inclusive and decolonised for each and every child, but for this to really work we need to go much further than that. The entire fabric of society needs to be radically musicalised, which means supporting parents and musicalising the structures that parents operate within. The cost of instruments and instrumental lessons and voice lessons are not the only barriers to music education, but also the atmosphere in which children grow up. How can you practise or simply play or sing if there is no physical or sonic space, and if your surroundings are unsympathetic to musical activity?



Fig. 5.3 Jeremy Richardson, Election window banner design © Lore Lixenberg.

Musical activity has a profound impact on the way in which the human brain functions. It makes the left and the right brain more integrated, and better at connecting thoughts, memories and emotions.⁹ It has a calming and invigorating effect on the brain, encouraging both independence and social cohesion, resulting in an individual being equipped to think for themselves, possibly immunising them against lies and media

9 Nigel Osborne, 'Neuroscience and "real world" practice: music as a therapeutic resource for children in zones of conflict', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1252 (2012), 69–76.

mendaciousness, making that person more confident.¹⁰ Little wonder then, that music is banned or at least controlled in totalitarian states. This quality of social cohesion coupled with individual free thinking is the last thing that budding authoritarian regimes and corporations want to encourage. Can you imagine an Amazon delivery truck driver orchestra or the Walmart Community Choir? Can you imagine the outcome if such things existed?

The Voice Party has a manifesto that can be summed up by the following main points:

1. The Voice Party is the only party you cannot join; it joins you.
2. The Voice Party aims to put music at the centre of UK politics by using musical forms as templates for social structures and by making musical activity mandatory for all institutions and businesses. Any organisation failing to implement this will be heavily fined via the Voxxcoin system (see below).
3. The fiscal policy: the Voice Party is not anti-capitalist or hyper-capitalist, rather it is a-capitalist. It is beyond capitalism. It has a specific fiscal policy and economic system and would put in place its own currency, the Voxxcoin.
4. The housing policy is that everybody should have one, and all new architectural structures would include acoustic planning as a priority. A building that has a wonderful acoustic as its primary objective will automatically enhance the health and wellbeing of the population. These buildings would also have mandatory dedicated rehearsal and practice spaces.
5. The Voice Party education policy is that all lessons of all subjects will be vocalised and history will be taught largely via the musical history of all cultures. Science will be taught through the prism of music, acoustics, psychoacoustics and sound generally.
6. Children would be encouraged to create and not consume. They would be encouraged to find themselves through

10 François Matarasso, 'The Parliament of Dreams: Why everything depends on culture', Version 2.5 (2013), 2. This text was originally given at Junction 2010, the Regional Arts Australia conference in Launceston, Tasmania on 27th August 2010.

meaningful artistic pursuits and not by buying their way into a particular look, tribe or identity.

7. The health policy states simply that everyone gets treatment when they need it and music therapy is a daily practice. Space would be made in all workplaces for musical meditation, and small ailments would be attended to before they escalate. Also, more funding would be dedicated to preventative medicine, and cutting-edge treatments would be available to all and not only the very rich.
8. The foreign policy simply states that it is mandatory for all visitors, immigrants and refugees, to contribute to the musical activities of the UK on arrival, in any way they wish. The Voice Party aims for orchestral and choral communities within open borders.
9. Defence policy: we shall sing our enemies into submission. We will destroy them with the power of our voices.



Fig. 5.4 Frederic Acquaviva Election night: 3am exhaustion with the obligatory flask of hot whisky todd © Lore Lixenberg (2019).

The Voice Party has already made additions to its front bench: a cabinet of advisors picked from a cohort of musicians, with the proviso that anyone who is on the front bench of The Voice Party must be a musician of some discipline. In addition to this, the Voice Party insists if it were to be in power, all politicians of all parties would go through a stringent anonymous audition, to be allowed to serve and must also be proficient in at least two languages as well as their mother tongue. They must also have lived in another country for at least three years. The front bench at the time of the UK election of 12 September 2019 was:

1. Party Leader: Lore Lixenberg.
2. Minister of Fluids and Fluidity: Bill Banks Jones.
3. Minister of Voxxcoin, Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer: Natalie Raybould.
4. Minister of Vintage Clothing, Environment, Farming and Fisheries: Heloise Werner.
5. Minister of Knowledge and Mental Pleasures: Martina Schwarz.
6. Shadow Home Secretary, or Minister of Flirtatiousness and Charm: Elise Lorraine.
7. Minister of Earth, Wind, Fire, Transport: Joost de Krammer.
8. Minister of Gatherings, Parties, Weddings, Funerals, End-of-the-World Soirees: Richard Thomas.
9. Department of Communications and Visual Representation: Jeremy Richardson.
10. Department of Compositional Technique and Art Curation: Frederic Acquaviva.

The Voice Party as opera and politics is, in some ways, an act of resistance in the same way that post-World-War-One Dadaism and post- World-War-Two Lettrism were an antidote to a time when words were twisted into lies by the political classes, leading to the horrors of the trenches and the holocaust. On top of this, in the twenty-first century we have a world of AI deep-fakes and increasingly sophisticated, yet woefully unoriginal chatbots, where you cannot even be sure that the person who appears to be saying something is actually saying it. We also have

a cacophony of art as entertainment: Netflix, opera houses and theatres dealing in dumbed-down, corporate cultural crack cocaine, and Society of Spectacle soylent green junk food. The only answer is to scream complex raw vocalisations in any way other than speech.

Maybe this all comes across as insane and non-implementable. But I ask you, why not dream up completely new systems of organisation? After all, what could be more insane than what we have in the UK right now? What could be more insane than spending billions on unusable personal protective equipment in a pandemic? What could be more insane than spending billions on a track-and-trace system that did not work? What could be more insane than the several tonnes of lobster rotting on a quayside in Scotland because the government could not get the Brexit paperwork together in time? What could be more insane than the blatant national self-harm that is Brexit? What could be more insane than Boris Johnson's haircut?



Fig. 5.5 Lore Lixenberg, The Voice Party Election street poster Berlin (2017)

© Lore Lixenberg.

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