



## PUTTING EGO ASIDE IN NEW OPERA: ON THE CO-CREATIVE DYNAMICS AROUND *JE SUIS NARCISSISTE*

Carles Vicent Pascual and José L. Besada

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**Abstract:** The world of opera is well known as a professional community in which egos often clash, yet the complexity of the operatic artwork is often heavily dependent on collaborative practice. This article discusses the co-creative dynamics that gave rise to the premiere production of the comic opera *Je suis narcissiste*, by composer Raquel García-Tomás, librettist Helena Tornero and stage director Marta Pazos. Through a series of interviews with this artistic team, and a scrutiny of the libretto, score and documentary video recording of its premiere, three significant features of this collaboration are flagged, particularly in Act VIII. These are: a quest for balance in the convergence of the disciplines involved; a mitigation of undesired redundancies in the representation of some elements in the action of the opera; a consideration of the capacity of the human and material resources available for the premiere. The article will also discuss how these anticipatory strategies helped to optimise time during rehearsals.

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Music performance is a paradigmatic case of human communication that depends on joint action and many facets of collaboration.<sup>1</sup> These forms of communication and collaboration are already present in our earliest musical interactions as infants,<sup>2</sup> and the collaborative ties implicit in the shared tasks and goals of music-making can benefit any social context.<sup>3</sup> Although there is a scholarly consensus about the collaborative features of music performance, that has not been the case for compositional practices. In the fields of psychology, sociology and pedagogy, several key aspects of collaborative composition have

<sup>1</sup> For example, on the negotiation of shared qualities of sound, see Karen Littleton and Neil Mercer, 'Communication, Collaboration and Creativity: How Musicians Negotiate a Collective "Sound"', in *Musical Imaginations: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Creativity, Performance and Perception*, eds David Hargreaves, Dorothy Miell and Ray Macdonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 233–41.

<sup>2</sup> Jessica Phillips-Silver and Peter E. Keller, 'Searching for Roots of Entrainment and Joint Action in Early Musical Interactions', *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 6 (2012). <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnhum.2012.00026/full> (accessed 31 July 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Kevin K. Miffin, Jubo Yan, Brian Waskin and William D. Schulze, 'The Sound of Cooperation: Musical Influences on Cooperative Behavior', *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 38, no. 3 (2017), pp. 372–90.

been explored,<sup>4</sup> but this topic has, until recently, been largely neglected by scholars scrutinising contemporary music. This fact may be explained by an individualistic conception of music, mainly originating in nineteenth-century Western culture and uncritically assumed by several avant-garde trends in the twentieth century. Creativity – and musical creativity in particular – is, however, context-based and goal-oriented; the Romantic myth of the lone genius does not hold anymore.<sup>5</sup> The topic of distributed creativity within the framework of contemporary musical practices, and particularly in the case of composition, is now being directly addressed across musical academia.<sup>6</sup>

Composers are often involved in distributed creative projects that go beyond strictly musical limits. The cases of opera and music theatre are particularly significant from this perspective, and, by adopting an autoethnographic approach, composers<sup>7</sup> and stage directors<sup>8</sup> have been able to report interesting features of their collaborative practices when co-authoring complex multidisciplinary artworks. Even musical works that do not have a dramatic plot, but in which instrumental performers are, nonetheless, requested to adopt theatrical attitudes, often incorporate creative elements which deserve analytical discussion as collaborative interactions.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the arrival of multimedia technologies as well as the ubiquity of social networks in our current daily lives have reshaped the creative dynamics of multidisciplinary projects in which contemporary musical practices are integrated;<sup>10</sup> the case of crowd-sourced composition<sup>11</sup> is particularly interesting from this viewpoint.

<sup>4</sup> Examples include: Dorothy Miell and Ray Macdonald, 'Children's Creative Collaborations: The Importance of Friendship when Working Together on a Musical Composition', *Social Development*, 9, no. 3 (2000), pp. 348–69; Gabriel Rusinek, 'Action-Research on Collaborative Composition: An Analysis of Research Questions and Designs', in *Musical Creativity: Insights from Music Education Research*, ed. Oscar Odena (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 185–200; Sylvia M. Truman, 'A Generative Framework for Creativity: Encouraging Creative Collaboration in Children's Music Composition', in *Exploring Children's Creative Narratives*, eds Dorothy Faulkner and Elizabeth Coates (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 212–23; and Michael T. Hopkins, 'Collaborative Composing in High School String Chamber Music Ensembles', *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 62, no. 4 (2015), pp. 405–24.

<sup>5</sup> Alfonso Montuori and Ronald E. Purser, 'Deconstructing the Lone Genius Myth: Toward a Contextual View of Creativity', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 35, no. 3 (1995), pp. 69–112.

<sup>6</sup> For a major contribution to the establishment of a model for this research, see Eric Clarke and Mark Doffman, eds, *Distributed Creativity: Collaboration and Improvisation in Contemporary Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Litha Efthymiou, 'Devising an Opera: *Myisi*', *Contemporary Music Review*, 35, no. 6 (2016), pp. 599–611.

<sup>8</sup> Matthias Rebstock, 'On the Aesthetics and Working Process of Elena Mendoza's Music Theatre', *Contemporary Music Review*, 38, nos 1–2 (2019), pp. 180–92.

<sup>9</sup> Louis D'Heudieres, 'Colourful Interactions: Composers, Theatrical Scores, and Music as Performance', in *Collaborative and Distributed Processes in Contemporary Music-Making*, eds Lauren Redhead and Richard Glover (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), pp. 12–26.

<sup>10</sup> This is implicitly shown in several recent studies on the impact of social media on contemporary music: see Zubin Kanga, 'All My Time: Experimental Subversions of Livestreamed Performance during the Covid-19 Pandemic', *Contemporary Music Review*, 41, no. 4 (2022), pp. 358–81; José L. Besada, 'Cover, Custom, and DIY? Memetic Features in Multimedia Creative Practices', *Contemporary Music Review*, 41, no. 4 (2022), pp. 382–400; and Anna Schürmer, 'The Extensions of Opera: Radio, Internet, and Immersion', *Contemporary Music Review*, 41, no. 4 (2022), pp. 401–13.

<sup>11</sup> The paradigmatic case of Alexander Schubert's *WIKI-PIANO.NET* has been discussed in Zubin Kanga, 'Wiki-Piano: Examining the Crowd-Sourced Composition of a Continuously Changing Internet-Based Score', *Tempo*, 74, no. 294 (2020), pp. 6–22; and Zubin Kanga, 'Performing *WIKI-PIANO.NET*: Strategies for Realizing Alexander Schubert's Ever-Changing Internet-Composed Piano Work', *Leonardo*, 54, no. 2 (2021), pp. 234–41.

This article explores the collaborative dynamics that gave rise to *Je suis narcissiste* (2018–19), a comic opera co-created by the composer Raquel García-Tomás (b. 1984, Barcelona), the librettist Helena Tornero (b. 1973, Figueres) and stage director Marta Pazos (b. 1976, Pontevedra).<sup>12</sup> On several occasions between February and March 2021 we interviewed these three artists. The material gathered was then systematically compared with the libretto, the score and the video of the opera premiere, so that we could reach a deeper understanding of their co-creative processes. In the article we first contextualise the opera and the conditions that led to the coming together of its collaborative team; then we explore the chronology of the collaboration, a process in which the conception of the libretto shaped subsequent creative trajectories; finally we focus on Act VIII in order to show mutual cross-fertilisations between the parallel work of the composer and the stage director and how these sometimes led them even to reconsider aspects of the pre-existent libretto.

### *Je suis narcissiste* in Context: Authorship and Background

*Je suis narcissiste* was commissioned by the Òpera de Butxaca i Nova Creació (OBNC) in Catalonia and both the Teatro Real and the Teatro Español in Madrid; Teatro Español hosted the work's premiere on 6 March 2019. The success of the opera was pivotal for the decision of the Spanish Ministry of Culture to award García-Tomás the Spanish National Music Prize for composition one year later. The plot of *Je suis narcissiste* consists of the opera's main character, Clotilde, experiencing a series of unfortunate events with several narcissistic characters, leading her to visit a reputed psychiatrist, Doctor Giovanni. It turns out that the person who presents himself as Doctor Giovanni is a patient with grandiose delusions, who has kidnapped and is impersonating the real psychiatrist. The body of the opera is structured in eight main acts, framed by a prologue and an epilogue that function like the opening and ending credits of a film. The structure of the opera as a whole alternates flashbacks of the traumatic incidents that Clotilde experiences with scenes in Doctor Giovanni's office.

The inception of *Je suis narcissiste* emerged during work on García-Tomás' and Tornero's previous opera collaboration, *disPLACE* (2016), which also involved the composer Joan Magrané. During rehearsals for its premiere in the Musiktheatergarte Wien, the original libretto was censored and altered by a third person, without the knowledge or consent of the author, Tornero. She expressed her displeasure to García-Tomás and they spent an evening in a Viennese café discussing their frustrations with being women in the creative arts. They shared the difficulties that they often experience in their attempts to have their voices respected within a male-dominated milieu and began to imagine the possibility of writing a comic opera to exorcise their frustrations. Tornero, who had visited the Freud Museum that day, proposed the topic of narcissism, but seen through a comic lens. García-Tomás loved the idea and they began to talk and laugh about something that at that moment seemed more like a crazy joke to comfort themselves. Finally, García-Tomás discussed the idea with Dietrich Grosse, the head of OBCN; he too

<sup>12</sup> We are very grateful for the time that Raquel García-Tomás, Helena Tornero and Marta Pazos devoted to these interviews; their contribution has informed many aspects of this article.

loved it and offered to produce it. Eventually their Viennese café conversation became *Je suis narcissiste*.

Raquel García-Tomás defines herself as a ‘composer specialising in interdisciplinary creation’.<sup>13</sup> Her catalogue is full of artistic projects that go beyond strictly vocal, instrumental and electroacoustic music: video art, installation, choreographic projects and opera are substantial elements of her oeuvre. So far she has composed, or co-composed, the operas *LSP 3.1* [*‘La serva padrona’ rifatta*] (2009–10), *DIDO reloaded* (2013), *go ÆNEAS, go!* (2014), *disPLACE*, *Je suis narcissiste*, *Per Precaució* (2020) and *Alexina B.* (2020–22). Helena Tornero has an extensive track record, developing plots for different media, such as theatrical pieces, screenplays for television and opera libretti. As well as her collaborations with García-Tomás she has written the libretto of ‘Carmen aux Enfers’, part of the collaborative opera *4Carmen* (2015), on which she worked with composer Mischa Tangian.

Once Dietrich Grosse was convinced of the operatic potential of García-Tomás and Tornero’s idea, he asked them to prepare a dossier, which was then successfully presented to the different institutions that would become co-producers of the opera. Tornero, who had already worked with Marta Pazos on *Sots l’ombra d’un bell arbre* (2014), introduced her to García-Tomás. *Je suis narcissiste* was in fact Pazos’ first experience as an opera director; she has gone on to be the stage director of García-Tomás’ later opera, *Alexina B.* Pazos has made further incursions into the opera world with *A amnesia de Clío* (2019), composed by Fernando Buide. In the development of *Je suis narcissiste* it is important to highlight that, in their dossier, García-Tomás and Tornero had already chosen Pazos as the person who would take care of the stage direction, but she joined the project after Tornero and García-Tomás had defined the plot of the opera. Nonetheless, Pazos was crucial in the final conception of the libretto, as will be discussed later.

There has been a growing number of opera and music theatre commissions in Spain during the last decades, but creative teams have chosen to present themselves as equal co-authors only relatively recently. Consider, for instance, the premières at the Teatro Real since its reopening in 1997:<sup>14</sup> Elena Mendoza was the first composer to share authorship, of her musical musical-theatre work, *La ciudad de las mentiras* (2011–14), with the stage director Matthias Rebstock.<sup>15</sup> It is probably not coincidental that Mendoza was also the youngest composer commissioned so far at this institution; her attitude could be regarded as evidence of a generational shift. As we mentioned earlier, García-Tomás and Magrané – both born in the 1980s – have co-composed the music of *disPLACE*; Óscar Escudero and Belenish Moreno-Gil, both born in the 1990s, have co-authored post-digital pieces for the stage, such as *Subnormal Europe* (2019–20) and *Héroes o Bestias* (2021–22).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> [www.raquelgarciatomas.com/about](http://www.raquelgarciatomas.com/about) (accessed 31 July 2023). See also Raquel García-Tomás, ‘Interdisciplinarity: An Expansion of My Creative Approach’ (Ph.D. thesis, Royal College of Music, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> For a scholarly discussion of the Spanish premières at the Teatro Real since 1997, see Carmen Noheda, ‘Ópera española contemporánea y Teatro Real: Políticas y estéticas de una renovación escénica desde las ruinas (1997–2017)’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Matthias Rebstock, ‘On the Aesthetics and Working Process of Elena Mendoza’s Music Theatre’, *Contemporary Music Review*, 38, nos 1–2 (2019), pp. 180–92.

<sup>16</sup> José L. Besada, ‘Empowerment durch multimediale Praktiken: Das Duo Belenish Moreno Gil: Óscar Escudero und der digitale Wandel’, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 3, no. 2022 (2022), pp. 31–34.

### Chronology of the Creative Process

When the core creative team had been settled, it was time to organise the creative process (see Figure 1). The first step was the realisation of the libretto, which, after the germination of the original idea in Vienna, was further developed in a number of meetings between Tornero and García-Tomás. Then Tornero wrote a complete libretto, working on her own, although with a few interventions by the composer. In February 2018 this was presented to both the composer and the stage director, who then worked in parallel on the creation of the music and staging, sharing their ideas in video meetings.

Although most of the libretto was already written when García-Tomás and Pazos started to work together, it was at no point regarded as an autonomous creation, impervious to any further input from the composer or the stage director. During the first stages of the development of the libretto Tornero and García-Tomás had several meetings in which they decided on the main features that would later make up the text, with a particular emphasis on musical ideas that García-Tomás was already envisaging for the opera.

Tornero also made it clear that she did not consider her own contribution to the opera complete until García-Tomás and Pazos had finished their work on the project, and the modification of the libretto was not limited to small changes but encompassed structural ones as well. For example, in Tornero's first draft of the libretto for *Je suis narcissiste* there was no Act II; instead, the action jumped directly from the prologue into Doctor Giovanni's office, where Clotilde has hurried in with an anxiety attack after her cat's death. Pazos suggested that the pet's passing had a significance which needed to be emphasised and so should be shown on stage. The addition of Act II, depicting the death, substantially altered the shape of the opera: although the textual modification was only slight – we simply see the cat miaowing and then suddenly dying – it became the very first action of the plot and required García-Tomás to write an extra two and a half minutes of music to accompany the situation on stage. This change was made possible because Pazos requested the libretto modification in the early phases of the creative process; a later change of this magnitude would have been less easy to implement.

### Co-Creative Dynamics around Act VIII

As well as García-Tomás and Pazos' regular online meetings, sharing material and comparing their development of the work, they were continuously in contact via email or WhatsApp, exchanging sketches and, in García-Tomás' case, audio recordings to demonstrate their respective progress. Consequently, both authors were aware of what the other was creating, sometimes providing reciprocal helpful feedback, and this exchange reveals the extent to which the creation of the music and staging were developed together, the two disciplines cross-fertilising and nourishing one another. This temporal organisation facilitated aspects of the creative process, enabling earlier choices to be modified by each member of the team according to the needs of their various artistic disciplines.

There were a number of occasions during the creative process of *Je suis narcissiste* when these kinds of situations emerged. Act VIII, 'El silencio' (The silence), was a particular milestone where the temporal distribution of the co-creation resulted in a significant series of cross-disciplinary modifications. In this act, Clotilde goes on a spiritual

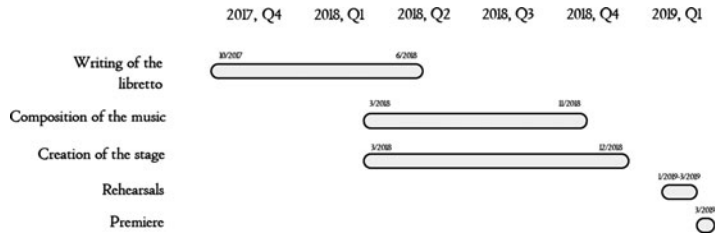


Figure 1:  
Timeline of the collaborative process  
for *Je suis narcissiste*.

retreat in search of the inner peace she has been seeking throughout the opera. As part of the spiritual practices in these retreats, standing bells – also known as singing bowls – are often used to generate a sound around which people meditate. García-Tomás used the sound of these objects in her conception of the music of Act VIII, and also implemented them within the electronic layer.<sup>17</sup>

In particular, the spectral analysis of the standing bells structured the instrumental and vocal music, especially its dialectic of harmony and inharmonicity, and led the composer to incorporate the harmonic series as compositional material around which the whole act is structured.<sup>18</sup> This harmonic strategy also becomes part of the musical and dramatic action: all the characters intone sustained pitches of the spectrum, as if they were uttering a mantra; in the context of a comic opera this becomes a parody of these spiritual practices (see *Example 1*). García-Tomás' music here has a diegetic function – in the sense that that term is used in the field of music for cinema<sup>19</sup> – through its integration within the plot, but the standing bell is also the pivotal musical feature of Act VIII, even though it is never specifically referred to in the libretto.

Because the bell sounds, the orchestrated sonorities and the unfolding of the harmonic series are aurally pervasive during Act VIII, Pazos felt that the singing bowl might become too dominant, and so she decided to avoid its physical and visual presence on stage. This does not mean that she decided to neglect this element of the music, however; on the contrary, these aural elements strongly impacted her stage choices as can be appreciated in the film of the opera (see *Figure 2*). Here the leading character in the scene, the Zen guru of the spiritual retreat, stands with his left hand outstretched while his right hand performs a rotating motion above it, a gesture that mimics the way in which singing bowls are vibrated to produce a continuous sound. Yet the guru's hands remain empty during the whole action and his gestural evocation of the instrument, absent from the stage, grows primarily out of the music rather than the libretto.

A second staging decision on which the music was more influential than the libretto occurs during this meditative passage. Just after the mantra-like texts, the Zen guru starts to talk about the stresses of daily life with technology. This brief moment, lasting about ten seconds,

<sup>17</sup> The actual sounds can be retrieved online. García-Tomás sounded the bell in two different ways: hitting it with a mallet (<https://freesound.org/people/dersinnsspace/sounds/417116/>, accessed 31 July 2023) and stimulating it continuously, as with fricative idiophones such as the glass harmonica (<https://freesound.org/people/dersinnsspace/sounds/417115/>, accessed 31 July 2023).

<sup>18</sup> Although this creative strategy fits with the notion of 'spectral thinking', García-Tomás should not be labelled, however, as a post-spectral composer; see Jonathan Cross, 'Introduction: Spectral Thinking', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 15/1 (2018), pp. 3–9.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Chion, *L'audio-vision: Son et image au cinéma* (Paris: Éditions Nathan, 1993).

## Example 1:

*Je suis narcissiste*, Act VIII, bars 43–47  
 (only woodwinds, piano and voices).  
 © Mondrigomax 2019. Reproduced  
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Musical score for Example 1, showing parts for A. Fl., E. Ho., B. Cl., C. Trp., Piano, Clarinet, M.S. (SB), and F. I. (TB). The score includes vocal lines with lyrics: "É-ti-mo-ri-te-a. S'i-mo-ga-i-te-i-a. Ba-a-l-ti-mo-ri-cti-a. A-l-ti-ga-i-a. É-ti-mo-ri-te-a. S'i-mo-ga-i-te-i-a. Ba-a-l-ti-mo-ri-cti-a. A-l-ti-ga-i-a. É-ti-mo-ri-te-a. S'i-mo-ga-i-te-i-a. Ba-a-l-ti-mo-ri-cti-a. A-l-ti-ga-i-a. É-ti-mo-ri-te-a. S'i-mo-ga-i-te-i-a. Ba-a-l-ti-mo-ri-cti-a. A-l-ti-ga-i-a." The piano part features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

## Figure 2:

Still from the recording of the premiere of *Je suis narcissiste*, Act VIII (1:00:32). Unpublished video; still reproduced with permission of the authors.



triggers a musical parenthesis: a sequence of glitched sounds<sup>20</sup> – mainly white noise, unpitched noises and distorted variations of the singing-bowl samples with several abrupt interruptions – in the electronics, surrounded by the strings bowing with great pressure (see [Example 2](#)). On stage, Pazos conceived a visual counterpart: the characters accompanying the Zen guru perform spasmodic movements as the glitched sounds start to be heard. Without the music, these physical jerks would not have been particularly comic, but the sounds, and particularly the glitched ones, transform the movements into gestures that evoke a kind of robotic failure.<sup>21</sup>

In instances like this it was a mainly musical choice, rather than something explicit in the libretto, that had an impact on the stage

<sup>20</sup> The use of glitched sounds has become pervasive in the post-digital approaches to contemporary music; see, for example, Alexander Schubert, *Switching Worlds* (Hofheim am Taunus: Wolke Verlag, 2021). For a broader overview on the aesthetics of glitched art, see Mark Nunes, ed., *Error: Glitch, Noise, and Jam in New Media Cultures* (New York and London: Continuum, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> For a comment on music's capacity to transform bodily actions into meaningful gestures, see Lawrence M. Zbikowski, *Foundations of Musical Grammar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 95–128.

*f* *spinali*

Quasi (b) *f* *spinali* Et sera technologique de son monde futuriste. La sève va mourir après. Estime. Patrice. Narcisse. Tornero. / Anah.

Viol. I *f* *Compensations*

Viol. II *f* *Compensations*

Viol. III *f* *Compensations*

Viol. IV *f* *Compensations*

Vcl. I *f* *Compensations*

Vcl. II *f* *Compensations*

Cl. I *f* *Compensations*

Cl. II *f* *Compensations*

Db. I *f* *Compensations*

Db. II *f* *Compensations*

Piano *f* *Compensations*

Example 2:

*Je suis narcissiste*, Act VIII, bars 48–53 (only guru character, strings and electronics). © Mondrigomax 2019. Reproduced with permission.

conception, but elsewhere cross-disciplinary influences flowed in the opposite direction, as in Act VII. The dramatic content of Acts VII and VIII is completely dissimilar, and the two acts involve four different characters, with only Clotilde taking part in both. As the cast for the opera's first production included only four vocal performers, it was essential to allow time for costume changes, and to this effect Pazos asked García-Tomás to provide some extra music, something the composer had not considered when she completed her first version of the end of Act VII. García-Tomás lengthened the musical transition, using electronics to introduce the singing bowl and the string section of the chamber orchestra to establish some of the sustained pitches from the harmonic series around which the music of Act VIII is based. To avoid a loss of dramatic interest during the costume changes, the orchestra conductor also makes a theatrical intervention, compensating for the absence of action on stage by acting like a mime (see Figure 3). Had the creative process been less consistently collaborative, the problem of the costume change would have emerged only when rehearsals began; here the problem was identified much sooner and solved both practically and aesthetically.

As we said earlier, Tornero did not consider that she had completed her work on the libretto until both García-Tomás and Pazos had achieved their own creative goals. This resulted in several slight modifications that are quite typical of any opera collaboration. Some elements of the text in Act VIII are repeated in favour of musicality: for instance, there are several passages in which the Zen guru sings first, followed by the other characters who comically imitate what he has uttered (see Example 3). Here García-Tomás suggested some reordering of the text, to create a fluidity that matched the musical structure she had in mind, elaborating her own dramatic discourse in parallel with Tornero's text and adapting its content to her



Figure 3:  
Still from a private video recording of the premiere of *Je suis narcissiste*, Act VII (57:57); reproduced with permission of the authors.



Example 3:  
*Je suis narcissiste*, Act VIII, bars 54–58 (only woodwinds, piano and voices). © Mondrigomax 2019. Reproduced with permission.

Example 4:  
*Je suis narcissiste*, Act VIII, bars 90–92 (only piano and singers). © Mondrigomax 2019. Reproduced with permission.

musical idea without losing the meaning of the initial version in the libretto.

Further modifications to the text for this act were also suggested by both the composer and the stage director. As the act progresses, one

secondary character starts an exaggeratedly optimistic monologue, while another one explains to Clotilde that he feels that the spiritual retreat is a fraud (see Example 4). The libretto originally juxtaposed these two elements after the Zen recitation, but they were finally merged to form a digression within the group meditative exercise so that García-Tomás and Pazos could achieve greater theatrical disparity on stage, setting multiple layers of action against a unifying musical background.

### Conclusions

Adorno argued that Wagner 'was aware of the painful contradiction between individualism and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but he hoped that rapture would exorcise or transfigure it'.<sup>22</sup> Wagner, as the sole author of every textual, musical and stage features of his operas, has long been regarded as epitomising the myth of the male Romantic genius. In contrast, this article has considered a collaborative work in which three female contemporary artists joined forces to reach a shared creative goal. Some features of Wagner's individualism may be no more than an unequivocal facet of his emphatic self-promotion<sup>23</sup> but the authors of *Je suis narcissiste* had no qualms about revealing the collaborative decision-making of their co-creation.

Through our discussion of *Je suis narcissiste* we have demonstrated a number of positive aspects of the collaboration. Working together the artistic team were able to balance the various elements involved in the opera by, for example, deciding to modify and extend the libretto so that it had a more robust coherence on stage. They also avoid referential redundancy that might have weakened the comic potential of the plot, as in the evocation of the standing bells in only sound and mime, and solved practical issues, such as costume changes, that related to the human and material resources of the first production without compromising the artistic quality and fluency of the opera. Collaboration proved optimal in the detection of practical issues prior to the rehearsal period and meant that the artistic team had more time during these rehearsals to polish minor details that might have been disregarded if they had had to deal with more problematic issues. Because collaborative working involves the coordination of all the creative partners it may be more demanding, but it helps to anticipate risks that can go unnoticed if the different disciplines are pursued separately.

Earlier we mentioned that Tornero and García-Tomás' initial motivation for creating *Je suis narcissiste* was their shared frustrations with being women in the creative arts, and the gender dimension of this project deserves a final comment. Some scholars have argued that women are much more likely to be part of collaborative artistic projects in which the value of joining forces and experiences is emphasised.<sup>24</sup> This argument clashes with the established archetype

<sup>22</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 99.

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Vazsonyi, *Richard Wagner: Self-Promotion and the Making of a Brand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Cynthia Bickley-Green and Anne G. Wolcott, 'Some Results of Feminist Collaboration in the Visual Arts: Changes in Art History and Art Criticism', *Journal of the Social Theory in Art Education*, 15 (1996), pp. 160–90; and Magdalena Sasin, Tamara Sass and Monika Modrzejewska-Świgulska, 'Processes Stimulating Dynamic Cooperation in Female Art Groups. A Qualitative Research Report', *Creativity: Theories – Research – Applications*, 6, no. 1 (2019), pp. 112–24.

of the individual creator, still very prevalent in contemporary music. Popular-music studies have unveiled important biases in the gendering of musical labour when analysing concepts like creativity,<sup>25</sup> and these biases are also present in the endorsement of individualism as a positive value in Western art music and its practices. To these biases a project like *Je suis narcissiste* is a welcome corrective.

### Acknowledgements

José L. Besada is funded by the Ramón y Cajal programme of the Research State Agency of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, and the European Social Fund (ref. RYC2020-028670-I).

<sup>25</sup> Kai Arne Hansen, 'Staging a "Real" Masculinity in a "Fake" World: Creativity, (In) Authenticity, and the Gendering of Musical Labour', *Cultural Studies*, 36, no. 5 (2022), pp. 713–31.