

## ***Casa – reflections on house & home: explorations of narrative, space and audience in a piano performance***

MODALIDADE: COMUNICAÇÃO

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**Abstract:** *Casa* was a piano recital/ performance inspired by Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, featuring a programme of contemporary Brazilian music. The project aimed to explore a narrative sense in its dramaturgy, and an expanded performance space with mobile audiences. This study contextualize *Casa* alongside other music performance works with narrative proposals, and works with alternative proposals for the audience. This report includes description of the creative process and reflections based on audience feedback and the performer's experience.

**Keywords:** Musical performance. Mobile audience. Interdisciplinary arts. Piano recital.

### **1. Introduction**

*Casa – reflections on house & home* was a piano recital which proposed the exploration of space and alternative settings for the audience. The inspiration for this work was Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, a book that reflects on the experience of living in spaces within the house, and how they resonate through memories of solitude and intimacy.

Gradually, this project acquired an autobiographical character. The reading of the book led me to think about the houses I have lived, how they play in my memory and define the passage of my life. Mirroring those personal reflections, the project was titled *casa*, a word in Portuguese (my mother tongue) which can mean either house or home.

The project was developed following a sense of narrative which interwove piano music performance and theatrical actions. The music programme featured pieces written by living Brazilian composers. I used a variety of pianos during the performance - upright, grand piano, and toy pianos. There were no seats for the audience, who were informed that they were free to move during the performance and explore the space.

The project was presented in three sessions at Oxford Brookes University Drama Studio in January 2016. In total, the performance was attended by approximately 45 people, which featured a range from 25 to 81 years old. In order to evaluate the reception of the proposal, the audience was given an optional and anonymous feedback questionnaire at the end of each session. The majority of the audience members were considerably acquainted with classical music<sup>1</sup>.

In this paper I will firstly draw a brief investigation on works which address the same questions concerning the audience, space and narrative, in order to contextualize the *casa* project. Subsequently I will describe my creative process as the development method, and will comment on the results based on audience feedback and on my own reflections as creator and performer of the work.

## **2. Contextualization: exploring narrative, space and audience**

### **2.1. Threading a music event: the narrative proposal**

The narrative as part of the structure of a music event has been explored in a diversity of ways in multidisciplinary works recently. For example, pianist Shani Diluka's project *Road 66*<sup>ii</sup>, presented as part of *It is all about piano Festival* (London, 2015), featured a piano recital of American Music accompanied by readings of excerpts of Jack Kerouac's book *On the Road*, in an effort to evoke impressions from North-American landscape and culture.

In a more visually expansive proposal, *Musica Brasilis - De Bach às Bachianas* (Brazil, 2015) combines theatre, music and video projection, in a project homage to writer Mario de Andrade and composer Villa-Lobos. An actor playing the role of Mario de Andrade recites excerpts of the writer's texts in between works by Bach and by Villa-Lobos performed by a chamber ensemble.

Also theatrical, but a more authorial proposal, pianist Sarah Nicolls' music/theatre show *Moments of Weightlessness* (UK, 2014-2016) is interwoven with recordings of her own testimonies, in order to create a narrative which combines the experiences of motherhood and the creation of a new musical instrument<sup>iii</sup>.

It is noticeable that all the projects cited above made use of verbal texts in their structure, either through live performance or recording. In fact, Ryan pointed out in *Narrative across Media: the languages of storytelling* (2004) the necessity of music to be supported by text if the aim is to build a deep narrativity. Ryan affirms that "in the absence of specific semantic content and spatial dimension, the deep narrativity of music is an essentially metaphorical phenomenon. (Ryan, 2004: 268). Ryan carries on explaining that "[music] can have narrativity without being a narrative" (idem). Thus, "having narrativity" would involve being able to evoke a narrative script in the mind of the audience, without necessarily telling a specific story.

### **2.2. The space of the performance: exploring alternative proposals for the audience**

In the recent decades, the performative arts field has seen a growing number of works which search for changes in the relationship between the audience and the artwork: from performances in alternative venues such as pubs and beaches, to proposals of interactive and/or immersive theatre, for example.

As a groundbreaker for new proposals to theatre audiences, Artaud speaks in his *Theatre of Cruelty* about extending the spectacle by eliminating the stage and breaking down the barriers between performers and audience. Artaud suggests placing the spectator "in the middle of the action" and physically envelope him/her, so a "direct communication will be re-established between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator" (Artaud, 1958: 96).

Nowadays, those ideas can be seen especially in productions classified as "immersive theatre", an expression that, according to Anderson, involves placing the audience "within the story-world. Rather than having a separated stage and auditorium, everything is the 'stage', and the audience is placed there alongside the actors" (Anderson, 2015).

Considered a contemporary reference on *immersive theatre* productions, London-based theatre company *Punchdrunk* has been highlighted as “a company that stages experiences, not plays” (Anonymous, apud Papaioannou, 2014: 161). *Punchdrunk* offers non-traditional possibilities to experience their work: its production usually occupies large industrial spaces and the spectators, who are asked to wear masks, are invited to explore and try out different points of view in relation to the performance and its setting (White, 2012: 225). The results of that “promenade performance”, combined with the greater proximity, challenges both spectators and the performance itself (Papaioannou, 2014: 163).

The act of dissolving the boundaries of the performative space and bringing spectators near the action also has the potential to create a sense of uncertainty and even discomfort in the audience. A common situation observed by Papaioannou is the spectators’ “attempts to *avoid* the performers”, as if coming to an agreement in terms of “polite distances of watching” (Doyle, apud Papaioannou 2014: 166).

I have observed that problematic as an audience member on dance-film production “Bridging the Void”, performed by dance company *Experience*<sup>iv</sup> in Oxford, UK, in March 2015. The work was performed in a “black box” style theatre with no seats for the audience, and featured three dancers interacting with a film which was projected on a wall-size screen. Despite a prior invitation to explore the space freely, the spectators spontaneously placed themselves surrounding the performance area, and most of people stood still for the whole duration of the event on that evening.

However, in opposition to that “agreed politeness” about distance between performance and spectators, Papaioannou also notices an eventual “subversive” audience behaviour, which in occasions seems to test the boundaries of the theatrical normality (Papaioannou, 2014: 166).

In a situation where the audience showed a more challenging position in relation to the performance space, I witnessed Elaine Mitchener’s performance of *Industrialising Intimacy*<sup>v</sup> in June 2015. This contemporary music theatre piece, which features vocal improvisation, movement and sound, was then performed at OVADA, an arts venue situated in a disused warehouse in Oxford, UK. The work demanded an extensive use of the space by the performer, who walked, run, stood still and crawled around the room. The standing spectators distributed themselves reasonably evenly in the space and just avoided to be on the performer’s way when she was running towards them.

Papaioannou observes that the “floating” behaviour of the audience between politeness and an eventual challenging attitude “enriches the intensity of the performance” (Papaioannou, 2014: 166). The spectators then become “a part of the choreographic landscape”, and emerge as “a renewed theatrical force” (idem).

### **3. Method - the shaping of the project/ a dramaturgical approach**

In December 2014 I started to read Bachelard’s book *The poetics of space*. The author’s reflection about the space of the house had a great impact on me, including his words about how spaces can speak about intimacy and shape our memories and dreams.

I then started to select some keywords and quotations during my reading, and began to search piano pieces which could dialogue with those explorations. I was instinctively drawn to a repertoire of contemporary Brazilian music, possibly because the process took an

introspective quality for me. Firstly, I searched for pieces with titles that could resonate the keywords and quotations. Subsequently I explored the musical material, and tried to identify elements that could be related to my reflections on the reading. In a two-way creative process, the music would give voice to my thoughts from the reading, whilst the literature would be an inspiration for the shaping of my musical interpretation.

I decided that the exploitation of space would be a key aspect of this project. I would use a variety of pianos - upright, grand piano, toy pianos - and would explore different vertical levels in order to allow movement and alternative perspectives. Also there would not be seats for the audience, as to offer freedom of movement to the spectator as well.

I began to explore objects - musical boxes, lamps, etc. - and other elements that would call my attention and compel a gesture. In this process, some objects and structures such as: a wardrobe, boxes, drawers, corners, attic and cellar, became indispensable elements, since they represented important sections of my engagement with the literature.

Eventually, I set each keyword as a scene and related a piece of music to each of those scenes. Also I noted down a quotation about each of the keywords:

Keyword/ Scene	Quotation	Music
Memories	“Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house”. (Bachelard, 1994: 7)	<i>Tátil</i> [Tactile] by Valéria Bonafé
Echoes	“... the old house, for those who know how to listen, is a sort of geometry of echoes”. (idem: 60)	<i>Ressonâncias</i> [Resonances] by Marisa Rezende
Corners	“When we recall the hours we have spent in our corners, we remember above all silence, the silence of our thoughts”. (idem: 137)	<i>Nenhum, Nenhuma</i> [None, None], by Gustavo Penha
The attic	“... even when the attic room is lost and gone there remains the fact that we once loved a garret, once lived in an attic”. (idem: 10)	<i>Ludvan ven Beethowig</i> , for two toy pianos and one player, by Daniel Moreira
The cellar	“... the dark entity of the house... When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths”. (idem: 18)	<i>gosto de terra</i> [it tastes like earth], for piano and live electronics, by Daniel Puig
Love, Intimacy, Dream	“[the house] bespeaks intimacy... The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace”. (idem: 6)	<i>El sueño... el vuelo</i> [The dream... the flight], by Silvia Berg

Table 1: Keywords/Scenes, Quotations and Music

Considering the variety of elements to be explored, I realized the need to work on the dramaturgy of the project, i.e., in the “weaving of the performance’s different elements” (Barba, 1985: 75). For this, I would understand dramaturgy as defined by Adam Versényi, as “the architecture of the theatrical event, involved in the confluence of components in a work, and how they are constructed to generate meaning for the audience” (Versényi, 2003: 386).

In order to receive some advices about dramaturgy, I had one-on-one informal meetings with professional dramaturgs and a choreographer<sup>vi</sup>. These conversations were helpful in realizing the autobiographical nature of the project and revealing possible emotional meanings behind some elements (e.g.: musical boxes as representation of different phases of life, some musical textures as resonance of some feelings). These conversations also suggested elements for exploration such as analogue lighting, disposition of the audience in the space, multiple instruments, and ultimately recommendations for the structure of the show.

It was decided that the audience would comprise 15 people only per session, in order to allow space for movement and also to suggest a more intimate environment. The performance was advertised through online and printed media, which included information about the no-seat characteristic of the project. The audience was asked to email me to book their tickets in advance. This system opened a channel of communication which allowed me to send an email to the booked audience members on the day before the performance, with additional information about the proposal, including a reminder about the lack of seats, and a word for them to feel free to walk during the performance and to explore the objects.

In order to propose a personal character to the event, I decided that I would open the performance room door myself and would greet each person of the audience as they walked in. I wrote their names on the programme booklets and handed them to individuals as they entered the space.

The programme booklets included notes about the inspiration for the project, and information about the meanings of some elements. Also it included the music programme, with the titles of the scenes and quotations that would relate to each of the musical works.

When the audience entered, the space was on warm ambient lighting. The performance lighting utilised domestic lamps which I switched on and off through the show. During the performance, besides moving from one piano to another, I did some actions as elements of transition between each one of the scenes. These actions included turning lamps on, winding up and playing music boxes, opening a wardrobe, looking at photos, playing recordings of my family’s voices and turning lamps off.



Fig. 1: Welcoming the audience. Photo by Stu Allsopp



Fig. 2: Scene "Memories": Action – winding up music box. Photo by Stu Allsopp



Fig. 3: Scene "Memories": Music – *Tátil* (by V. Bonafé). Photo by Stu Allsopp



Fig. 4: Scene "Echoes": Action – wardrobe, photos and recordings of voices. Photo by Stu Allsopp



Fig. 5: Scene "Echoes": Music – *Ressonâncias* (by M. Rezende). Photo by Stu Allsopp



Fig. 6: Scene “The attic”: boxes. Photo by Stu Allsopp



Fig. 7: Scene “The attic”: Music – *Ludvan ven Beethowig* (by Daniel Moreira). Photo by Stu Allsopp

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Audience’s feedback

At the end of the performance I told the audience that I would appreciate to know their comments about the project, and I handed them a short questionnaire with questions about their impressions of the show and how the extra-musical elements impacted their engagement with the music. I informed them that answering it was optional, and 16 audience members were pleased to complete it and return to me either immediately or later by email. Also three people preferred to meet me on the days after to talk about their impressions.

A great majority of the responses were positive. Many of the reactions were considerably emotional, with people mentioning thoughts and feelings which were triggered by the work, including memories of childhood and feelings of homesickness: “I became quite nostalgic and my thoughts dwelt on my childhood home and the security provided by my parents, and the house” (Anon. audience, by handwritten feedback).

The welcoming aspect of the performance was received positively, and it was especially helped by the fact that I greeted each person personally as they entered into the room: “I found myself at ease from the beginning. Partly because of your warmth and openness in welcoming your guests, and also by the intimate nature of the arrangement of the studio, light and furniture, space to be in” (Anon. audience, by handwritten feedback). Additionally, “the fact that you were coming and going with freedom and barefeet” helped to enhance the impression of a homely environment for some people (Anon. audience, by email, translated from Portuguese).

The comments about the exploration of space generally featured considerable enjoyment, especially regarding the possibility of the audience to experience the work from different angles: “I enjoyed being able to move around so as to view the events from different angles, and the acoustics from different points made for a deeper level of experience” (Anon. audience, by email). However, there was one negative feedback from a member of audience who felt uncomfortable about standing and did not feel confident of what he/she was allowed to do: “I didn’t feel quite comfortable standing. Wasn’t sure if I could/ should be moving, so I couldn’t settle and really listen”. (Anon. audience, by handwritten feedback).

The other extra-musical elements such as the quotations included on the programme, the objects, actions in between the music, and lighting, were generally well received. Apart from one person that found they “made it harder to listen to the music” (Anon. audience, by handwritten feedback), those elements were mostly appreciated as helpful to enhance the experience of the music:

“[The quotations] helped to set the music into a context that was both in the geography of ‘casa’ and also helped the listener to understand the reasons you had chosen each piece” (Anon. audience, by email).

“The movement of the performer between the pianos and objects created spaces between the pieces for me to absorb each piece and to reflect on the quotes and the connections between the pieces and the theme” (Anon. audience, by email).

“[The extra-musical elements] created the context and made me listen to music as not an abstraction, but filled it with a certain visual images, directed my mind in a way” (Anon. audience, by handwritten feedback).

Also, a sense of narrative was highlighted in the general impressions about the project, including comments of feeling “as if I had been in a journey” (Anon. audience, by email), and observations about “the sense of a story, but not necessarily a linear one” (Anon. audience, by informal spoken feedback).

#### **4.2. Reflections from the performer’s point of view**

*Casa* was a project that challenged me in both introspective and expansive directions, respectively during the creative process and in the moment of the performance.

Firstly, the autobiographical and reflective character of the work required me a process of introspection which included searching memories from family and from different phases of my life. The introspective process helped me to define the tone for the project, which affected my choice of the repertoire and the way that I approached the pieces. In that respect, the literary reference influenced my musical interpretation directly. The reflections on the quotations inspired gestures and instigated me to create mental images, which influenced my choices of dynamics, phrasing and tones in my playing.

Subsequently, during the performance, I found myself challenging some paradigms that had been usual in my practice as a classical pianist. From the beginning, the usual isolation of the musician before a concert was prevented by the fact that I ushered the



audience in myself. If, in the past, I enjoyed that isolation to help me to concentrate, I now had to find a way to maintain a relaxed and outgoing attitude, and yet to be able to focus despite the change on my usual “before-the-concert ritual”.

The physical relationship between audience and performer was changed from its usual setting in a classical music context: there was no barrier, i.e. considerable distance, between me and the audience, I could feel people watching me from all directions, and eventually moving around even while I was playing technically demanding passages. That situation turned to be a great challenge to keep focused and yet to feel at ease within the whole context.

Also I was required to step out of the usual still position of the pianist by having to move from one piano to another, walk around the space and do the actions in between the pieces of music. These changes of paradigms were challenging but also brought me a sense of liberation and deeper integration with the work. I was urged to become more aware of my whole body, also to explore a much larger repertoire of movements and my corporeal expressivity. Instead of feeling as if I was performing one piece after another, as it has happened in some of my previous conventional recitals, I could immerse myself more effectively in the context and shape my performance as a whole.

### **5. General Reflections/ Conclusion**

The *casa* project was a proposal to shape a piano recital following a sense of narrative, also to explore space and an alternative setting for the audience. Having Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* as the starting point, the project developed into an autobiographical aspect. Thus, I found it useful as a method to allow the work to develop organically, and subsequently engage in reflections about the elements which emerged in the creative process, searching for meanings and potential materials that could help to structure the piece.

The standing audience and the expanded performance area with no clear definition of a stage area made reference to the category “immersive theatre”. These elements seemed effective strategies to bring the audience closer to the action and to envelop them in the work, also allowing the experience from different perspectives. My exploration of the space as a performer - from welcoming the audience myself to moving from one piano to another and doing some actions between the pieces - broke paradigms in my practice as a classical musician, and could suggest some dialogues with theatre and performance art. Those factors brought new insights for my musical interpretation: they allowed to immerse myself in the work and shape my performance as a whole, as well as feeling more connected and integrated with my audience. The sense of narrative, also explored through quotations from the literature, was an interesting tool to provide a context to the music repertoire, which was mentioned as helpful in engaging the audience with the work.

*Casa* has been one of the most challenging works I have presented, in which I could explore the idea of using concepts of dramaturgy to develop a piano recital/performance, as a comprehensive artwork.

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<sup>i</sup> 72% of the audience members who shared feedback declared themselves considerably experienced in classical music, while 14% considered themselves just reasonably acquainted, and equally 14% declared themselves not experienced at all with classical music.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://institut-francais.org.uk/itsallaboutpiano/2015-edition/events/route-66/>. Accessed March 2016.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://sarahnicolls.com/review-moments-of-weightlessness/>. Accessed March 2016.

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.experientialdance.com>. Accessed 28 March 2016.

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.ocmevents.org/ocm/events/olivercoateselainemitchener>. Accessed 02 April 2016.

<sup>vi</sup> Many thanks to Joel Horwood, Rob Drummer, Nomi Everall and Ellie Aldegheri.