

Composition as Political Action: In Conversation with Dr Laura Bowler

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As described by The Arts Desk, Dr Laura Bowler is 'a triple threat composer-performer-provocatrice'. She is the vocalist in Ensemble Lydenskab, and as a composer she has been commissioned by orchestras and ensembles across the globe. She is a Tutor in Composition at the Royal Northern College of Music and Lecturer in Composition at Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

I interviewed Dr Laura Bowler on the evolving relationship between music and politics through the captivating, yet sometimes overlooked sphere of contemporary experimental music.

Bowler really is one of a kind. Described by the Arts Desk as a 'triple threat composer-performer-provocatrice'¹ she is a renowned composer, vocalist and artistic director, specialising in theatre, multidisciplinary work and opera. Her works have been performed by some of the world's leading ensembles, including the BBC Symphony Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Manchester Camerata. Bowler is also a Tutor in Composition at the Royal Northern College of Music, where she invites her students to also explore the unique fusion between music and theatre in the realm of contemporary experimental music. However, it is Bowler's utilisation of pressing political topics as central themes for her music—including climate change, social media and political 'slacktivism'—which were the prime sources of intrigue in this illuminating dialogue. Indeed, by incorporating brash and provocative theatrical techniques, Bowler urges her audiences to subsequently reflect on the issues she presents to them. In our discussion, I invited Bowler to consider the mechanics by which compositional praxis and the production and consumption of new music can act as political intervention. By placing special emphasis on her two most notable works, *Antarctica* and *FFF* (Freeze, Flight, Fight), Bowler addresses the complex dialectic between content and form, unpicking the functions that compositional intervention and dissemination can offer political objectives. Especially in the realm of contemporary experimental music, where her target audience may seem narrow, Bowler also considers the limits and challenges faced when mobilising musical material for social change.

Before unpacking her music, I was intrigued to hear about Bowler's rather unique educational background. Born in Staffordshire, Bowler first studied Saxophone at the Royal Northern College of Music as an undergraduate, before switching to Composition after a term because of stage fright. This is ironic, of course, since she performs in all her musical projects. However, it was not until her master's studies at the Royal Academy of Music in London that theatre started to play a central role in her work. After coming across the provocative *Theatre of Cruelty* manifesto by the French dramatist Antonin Artaud, she made the text the focal point in her master's thesis: 'It made such an impact on me because of Artaud's desire to search for the *real* and the *raw* in performers.' Experiences outside of music college at the time further fuelled her passion for the theatrical, including a trip to the National Theatre in Warsaw to watch a production of Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*. Language barrier notwithstanding (the play was translated into Polish), it was the physicality of the performance that moved Bowler above all else. Indeed, she 'could not believe the level of sacrifice of these performers, and what they were giving and sharing.'

'How can I find *this* in the western Classical music tradition?' It was this question, Bowler asserts, which became the focal point of her doctoral work. Finding any solutions to this puzzle proved challenging. Despite Bowler's passion for theatre, she had not received any formal training in theatre or drama. To overcome this barrier, she embarked on a theatre master's degree at the Royal Academy of the Dramatic Arts (RADA), a move which, for Bowler, was fundamental to where her work is now.

The wonderful thing about the course [at RADA] was that not only did you get incredible training on how to facilitate rehearsals and facilitate a room and a psychology of a room, but you also got physical theatre training from the Theatre Ensemble Course there. I studied Grotowski

¹ Rayfield Allied, 'Laura Bowler' <<http://www.rayfieldallied.com/artists/laura-bowler>> accessed 30 March 2021.

theatre—very much linked to my work on Artaud at conservatoire—and focused on physicality and the ‘raw’ in performance and pushing my body to the extreme.

This passion for physicality is not only transferred to her work but also in her composition teaching. At the Royal Northern College of Music, Bowler leads a ‘Physicality and Performance’ course. By introducing her students to ‘Jerzy Grotowski theatre’ (which aims for complete integration of the actor’s mental and physical senses to reveal the core substance of a character) and the ‘Stanislavski Technique’ (a system comprising various techniques designed to allow actors to create and embody believable characters), Bowler is constantly questioning her students (an ‘interrogation’ method, she jokes) to find their true ‘rawness’.

This approach is perhaps similar to how theatre directors work today: Constantly questioning their actors, their motivations within the character, so that they then can reflect back on that, and find what it is they are ‘doing’ but not quite ‘doing *accurately*’.

It was after her ‘fundamental’ studies in the Dramatic Arts that Bowler’s urge to write political works came about. She realised that abstract music on its own terms was not a strong enough vehicle to fully communicate the true human experience of the world; a composition could, therefore, be ‘directed’ if it wants to be. However, it was actually during her final years of her undergraduate degree when she first gained an interest in moulding her works around sociopolitical issues and, more importantly, in using her unique compositional idiom to convey a fully human experience. Bowler wrote a work on her experience of anorexia as part of a collaboration with the BBC playwright Lavinia Murray. Bowler toured this very human work round schools in her hometown in Staffordshire where, before performing the piece, she would also talk to students about her experiences of anorexia. This was especially provocative at the time, because she was still ill. This compositional ethos—that of writing music based on personal experiences which, subsequently, invites her audiences to reflect on their own actions—pervades her writing today.

I was very much doing it because this was my experience of the world, and that was what I was using to create this work. This certainly became the starting point for this need to communicate about the human experience in a more direct way than what was possible with ‘abstract music’.

This forms the crux of one of her most significant works, *Antarctica*, an immersive multimedia work for orchestra and vocalist which was co-commissioned by the Manchester Camerata and BBC Radio 3. As suggested by the title, it is the pressing issue of climate change which takes pride of place in this piece. Before writing, Bowler realised that, like most people in privileged populations, her view of climate change was too obscure, preventing her from creating a truly personal, provocative work. So, in order to overcome this limitation, she embarked upon a voyage to Antarctica. While sailing, she recorded videos and took audio samples which, upon writing the work, were manipulated and juxtaposed to create an evocative ‘soundscape’ work. By essentially bringing back her experience of this environment that so few people get to experience first-hand, Bowler’s immersive experience persuades her audiences to reflect on this beautiful, fragile landscape, ‘so that it remains that way’. This is especially the case with the work’s ‘dark turn’.

The flipside of the work is the politics surrounding climate change and the manipulation of governments, the presentation and rejection of climate laws, and the use of text from the media and politicians. That complete juxtaposition with this beauty and landscape was important. The point of it all was to allow audiences to wallow in that beauty, only to be hit by the grotesqueness of the reality and our ignorance.

What do audiences themselves think? For Bowler, discussions with her listeners—or more accurately, ‘spectators’—are crucial for understanding whether the messages conveyed were powerful enough that they then felt the need to take action. These engagements have clearly stuck with Bowler, and she seems surprised by the things she has been told or asked. For example, after *Antarctica*, an elderly couple approached her, since they had also visited Antarctica, but on a cruise ship.

They were saying that ‘we did not see any rubbish when we were there, and we didn’t see any of the things that you described.’ I then told them that the areas a cruise ship ventures in are obviously maintained for tourism, thus explaining the differences of our own experiences. Yet, because their experience of Antarctica was so pure and untainted, they almost could not accept what I had presented to them. It ruined their memory of it, which was very interesting.

The question Bowler seems to be asked most often is this: what new solutions is she presenting in her works? This question is certainly relevant here, especially since we are exploring this work through the lens of political action. Certainly, the theatrical elements embedded in her work imbibe connotations of protest. However, Bowler simply sees her unique musical idiom—her responsiveness to the ‘indirectness’ she perceives in pure abstract music—as a vessel to encourage audiences to simply reflect on the issues at hand and take action.

I don’t have the solutions. I’m not a scientist. Audiences experiencing this piece should then go home and think a little bit more about it. It takes them one step further on their path to acknowledging climate change and doing their individual bit towards it. That is what I see my role as here.

Bowler is excited to be addressing climate change again in a work provocatively titled *temperatures aren’t what they used to be*, which she is currently writing for the London Sinfonietta as part of a collaboration with play-writer Cordelia Lynn, theatre director Katie Mitchell, and documentary filmmaker Grant Gee. In stark contrast to *Antarctica*, the work centers on the issues of climate denial and climate psychology, inspired by responses she received on the subject by people completing a questionnaire.

It is a very individual experience. It does not really concern science or facts, but it’s about the process of going ‘OK, climate change is a thing, what does that mean? What can I maybe do as an individual?’ It is quite broad with regards to the spectrum of responses I got. Some people are activists, others do not do anything, and some recycle but drive an SUV. As you can see, this is a hugely complex topic, which is what I want to explore here.

Alongside her interest in global warming, Bowler’s works also address the problems associated with political ‘slacktivism’. This is an informal term which the Oxford Dictionary defines as ‘the

practice of supporting a political or social cause by means such as social media or online petitions, characterised as involving very little effort or commitment'.² Some of her frustrations are addressed by her most physical work, *FFF* (Freeze, Flight and Fight) for ensemble and vocalist, co-commissioned by BBC Radio 3 and the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival.

I came to write this piece because, like everyone else, I was on social media and sharing various things that were making me angry, and I was getting very involved in very heated conversations online, which were generally not very helpful for either party. I realised the *physical* impact it was having on me, that although the existence of social media is one step removed from reality, it was affecting me so much on a really *physical* level.

What has this got to do with 'Freeze, Flight, Fight', a phrase which describes our instinctive and physiological response to danger? Well, while thinking about the physical effect on social media, she came across an article concerning the relationship between 'Freeze, Flight, and Fight' and politics, in relation to how one behaves in relation to political news. Bowler was intrigued and decided to write a work which conveyed this paralysing physical response to social media.

Like most of her works, moulding these very physical ideas into music comes with many challenges. One big obstacle to overcome is the fact that Bowler herself performs all of her music. Indeed, she sings through her pieces before writing them, which substantially aids the compositional process. I asked Bowler a question many have asked her before, namely whether she would ever give her pieces to someone else to perform. She replied with a firm 'no'. Perhaps, Bowler states, she would consider it at some point, but would want to be present in the rehearsal process. It is clear how attached she is to her music, given that the messages reflected emanate from her own experiences. Audiences, therefore, are moved by such authentic, visceral projections of these messages, and are perhaps inclined to reflect on what they have just witnessed.

What about the players she works with? While watching *FFF*, I was immediately struck by how physical the orchestra was. Not only did the complexity of the instrumental texture lead to extremely gestural playing, but the players themselves were required to act at times and make various vocalisations. This is all very demanding, but Bowler's training in Theatre Directing is a crucial asset here as she goes through all the actions in detail to ease the players's tension. Of course, while her ensemble enthusiastically seeks to grasp and perform her ideas, Bowler is willing to compromise because, at the end of the day, musicians perform better if they are comfortable. Furthermore, Bowler's role as a performer here also helps because her passionate demeanour in performance is very much absorbed and echoed by the players. A sense of comradeship evolves here, which also fuels the powerful messages of this work.

FFF is formed of three movements named 'Freeze', 'Flight', and 'Fight', with chaos and disorder emerging right from the work's outset. The first movement commences with Bowler announcing,

'In the beginning', words from the opening of Genesis: words which, contrary to Bowler's musical texture here, reflect stillness, serenity and, more importantly, order. The connotations of immobility and self-protection associated with the 'Freeze' are vividly captured in this movement.

The conflict between music and text is exactly to do with the passiveness with the experience of social media. It addresses how 'pervasive' social media is becoming in society and how it is slowly but surely affecting our behaviour. The movement shows how incredibly violent social media is, even if we do not know that it is. All of these juxtapositions of how it behaves is what I am trying to capture in some way in that first section.

The second movement 'Flight' sees Bowler appropriately embody the role of an air stewardess. Anger is momentarily sidelined, as she is seen signing sheets of paper, scrunching them up and throwing them across the stage. This all represents the act of signing online petitions, which Bowler considers to be emblematic of political 'slacktivism'.

The movement functions as a commentary on our privilege to not only want the internet, but to want the internet to go 'Yes, I can sign it, and then I'll share it as a good deed, because I'm a good person.' But, how many people would sign it had they not been exposed to it on social media in the first place? I am certainly guilty of this, but it is important to reflect on that, and notice this process as 'slacktivism'.

The chaos then resumes for the final movement 'Fight', where Bowler puts on an 'emoticon' head mask, repeatedly shouting the words 'You capitalist! You socialist'. This represents a call to arms demanding that, instead of sitting there, scrolling and doing nothing, we take action. This is perhaps the most intense we see Bowler, shouting and pushing her voice to breaking point. However, Bowler then shuts down and a pre-recorded video of herself appears playing for the remainder of the piece. At this point, the players are spraying themselves with detergent and Bowler is passing round disinfectant wipes to the audience, though this has nothing to do with the current pandemic. While this is all happening, the virtual Bowler tells the audience that they 'all need to get into a great big bath of disinfectant and we need to disinfect ourselves'. Bowler explains: 'This moment here the idea of "cleaning" ourselves before we go out and take part in the "true and honest" fight, and not the "slacktivist", easy one.'

While these works engage provocatively with global issues, challenges arise when presenting them in the elitist world of contemporary experimental music, let alone Western classical music. Bowler is always aware that her music attracts a very niche type of audience and, as a result, thinks a lot about what is presented in her works and how. This is certainly an arduous task, since one can never predict what her audience is going to think or whether her ideas have come across in the way she intended. However, what is vital for Bowler is that, when one makes political works, regardless of what artistic medium one is working in, the formatting which is presented has to be fundamental to the context in which it is performed in. She unpacks this a little further:

With *FFF*, for example, the work was specifically designed for that form of the contemporary music festival. It wouldn't work the same if it was presented at Bridgewater

² 'Slacktivism, N.' (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*) <<https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2446/view/Entry/51394141?redirectedFrom=slacktivism#eid>> accessed 30 March 2021.

Hall for the Manchester Camerata, because the people who go would not experience the piece with the same kind of context of works that they know, and it would mean very different things, and they may be drawn the 'peculiarity' of the work rather than what's *in* the work.

However, despite the apparent solidity of her craft, Bowler poignantly reveals that she is constantly learning, seeking new ways to communicate the issues she is so passionate about, to ensure her audiences feel that same ardour to take swift action and to reflect on their own actions. It was inspiring to hear Bowler's thoughts on music's multifaceted power to express pressing political issues.

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