Composers' Professional Education Reclaiming the Public Sphere Through a Public Pedagogy of Dissensus in a Multi-Arts Opera Course

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Abstract

This article explores a multi-arts artistic experiment and transdisciplinary collaborative opera course as public pedagogy in composers' professional education. By highlighting the distinctions between a pedagogy *for* the public, a pedagogy *of* the public, and a pedagogy that enacts a concern for 'publicness', respectively, we demonstrate the potential of combining public pedagogy with a pedagogy of dissensus in multi-arts collaborations. The theoretically-oriented, retrospective, and dialogical co-exploration analyses the overall aims and ways of working in the dialogical and collaborative one-year-long 'Opera as a multi-artistic collaboration' course, which involved a total of 51 students and 13 teachers from different music and arts programs at the University of the Arts Helsinki. It advocates for a systems change in HME that would institute public pedagogy in its craft-based, critical, and open-format mode. The article argues that the idea of approaching public pedagogy as a theoretical lens can open new horizons for higher music education that will allow it to explore the publicness of arts performances in novel ways; it will also enable it to reconfigure professional education in classical music in an era when contemporary composers have lost their previously self-evident societal prestige, and when music experts may need to expand their understandings of professional responsibilities beyond the pursuit of musical quality.

Keywords

composing, higher music education, opera, pedagogy of dissensus, public pedagogy

Journal of Public Pedagogies, Number 9, 2026
Published by Public Pedagogies Institute: www.publicpedagogies.org
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URL http://jpp.vu.edu.au/

Introduction

Western classical music composers are often presented as innovative societal agents who have paved the way for not only new styles and artistic ideas but also supported the idea of responsibility for collective futures. Considering Arnold Schönberg (1874–1951), who launched the equality of 12 tones over decades, John Cage (1912–1992), who expanded the concept of music to include the sounds of the environment, or Kaija Saariaho (1952–2023), whose latest opera *Innocence* deals with collective responsibility in the form of the tragedy of school shootings, one can ask: How is this societal potential of contemporary composers recognized in today's higher music education (HME)?

Researchers have indeed called for musicians' engagement with civic missions (Gaunt et al., 2021), musical citizenship (Elliott et al., 2016), as well as socially responsible (Westerlund & Gaunt, 2021) and ecopolitically aware professionalism (Barrett & Westerlund, 2024), to challenge the persistent principles underpinning not just the socially exclusive, established concert hall practice, but also the institutionalised forms of professional education in music. Studies have questioned the "value of artistic individualism" (Kingsbury, 1988, p. 37) and the idea of an apolitical *L'art pour l'art*, and the assumed atemporal nature of quality in the star culture (e.g., Samson, 2001; Turino, 2008), which increasingly locate the value of music in "the private pleasures of consumerism" over the public good or political interests (Woodford, 2019, p. 111). As a remedy for the persistence of these traces of past societies in HME, research has suggested an increasing variety of measures: musical pluralism (Sarath et al., 2017); diluting and dismantling "many of the traditional hierarchies … in favour of open participation and opportunity" (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2021, p. xvi); integrating peer-learning in educational practices (Partti et al. 2015), providing collaborative spaces (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013) and alternative performance contexts (Carey & Coutts, 2021); and creating curricula in which values can be discussed reflexively, not simply for students "to value their professional practice" (Rowley et al., 2021, p. 69). Most recent HME research has suggested engaging with an ecologically driven arts-science integration (Laes et al. 2024), or other transdisciplinary approaches towards education that is "more problem-centered, holistic, synergetic, interactive, flexible and reflexive" (Westerlund & Barrett, pp. 260–261). By engaging in "a more culturally and politically diverse and cross-disciplinary discussion" (Westerlund et al., 2025), HME could thus ideally "be seen as the main mediating space for critically examining modernist dichotomies, unnecessary hierarchies, and the mythical ideal of music practices being sociopolitically neutral" (Westerlund & Karttunen, 2024).

In pointing out the problems with Western classical music education, Westerlund and Karttunen (2025) have described the core of HME practices with the *Success to the Successful* systems archetype, to illustrate how the 'music only' focus and individualistic star culture creates a vicious circle in which no other issues are communicated and in which mutual competition prevents a more collaborative culture from emerging (see Figure 1). The elements of the Success for the Successful archetype also produce an understanding of publicity through the highest technical achievements of young musical talents, which is thought to bring glory to the educational institution and its teachers (López-Íñiguez & Westerlund, 2023). This raison d'être of HME explains simply "why we do what we do—and why we do not do other things" (Westerlund & Odendaal 2025, p. 26). Also composition students are socialized in this educational culture and its value hierarchy, which further constructs the public image of the composer. While creating new concert music as a continuum to the historical progression can be seen as the ideal career path for a successful composer (Talvitie, 2021), other practices of music creation, such as interdisciplinary collaborations or pedagogical practices, fall out of the system's core practices as less valuable.

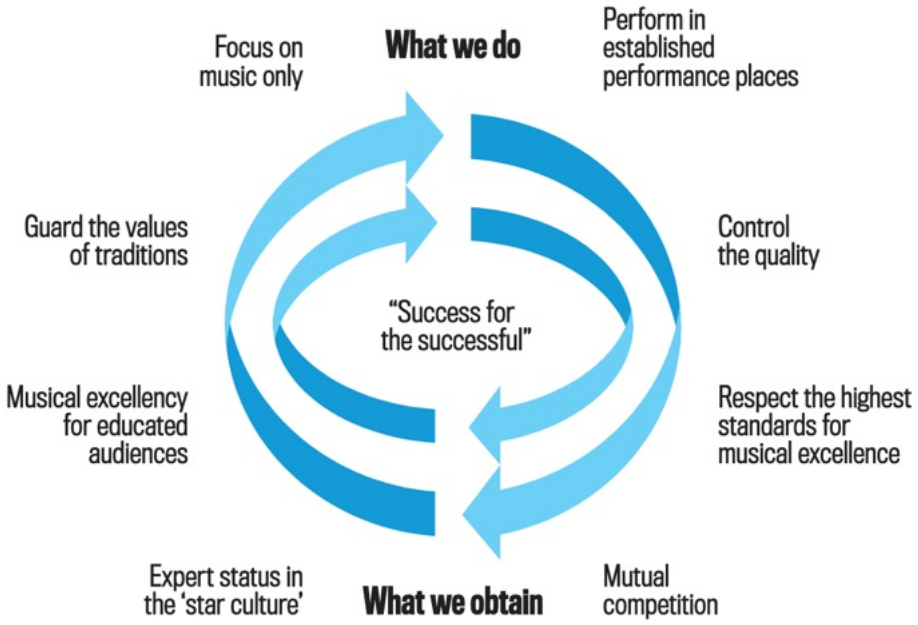


Figure 1. Success for the Successful archetype illustrates the mental model that generates the individualist and isolationist HME star culture. (Westerlund & Karttunen, 2025, p. 179)

To amplify the potential of HME to engage with imaginative, ecologically aware responsibility and to reconsider composers' societal position in the current era of neoliberal, economically-driven forces, this article examines a transdisciplinary HME opera course as public pedagogy. The one-year-long 'Opera as a multiartistic collaboration' course (henceforth MiniOperas) at the University of the Arts Helsinki (Uniarts) created an experimental collaborative space to explore questions such as: What is opera? How is it created? Who is allowed to create and perform it? And, why would opera matter in contemporary society? More specifically, in this article we will focus on identifying how the course disrupted established HME pedagogical processes and the historically constituted ways of creating operas. Drawing on the work of Gert Biesta (2012, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c) and Jacques Rancière (2003, 2009, 2010), we argue that the idea of public pedagogy can open up new horizons for HME to explore the question of the publicness of arts performances in novel ways, including the relationship between performers and the audience; and, second, that especially multi-artistic, transdisciplinary opera productions can become fruitful educational spaces, extending beyond one's own career interests.

We will navigate the MiniOperas course through the ideas of "a pedagogy for the public" and "of the public" towards "an enactment of a concern for 'publicness' or 'publicity'", the latter being, according to Biesta (2012), "a *concern for the public quality of human togetherness* and thus for the possibility of actors and events to become public" (p. 693, emphasis added). In particular, we focus on the interruptive potential of collaborative, multi-artistic pedagogical situations in which prevailing, commonly accepted practices and aesthetic values are challenged "in dialogue with the world… without occupying the centre of the world" (Biesta, 2017c, p. 15). Following Rancière's thinking, these kinds of pedagogical practices could be called dissensual "where the notion of dissensus refers to situations in which something is produced in a world (teaching and learning) that is in some way heterogeneous to its existing patterns, so as to open up new possibilities and transformations of a world and of co-existence" (Atkinson, 2018, p. 6). By focusing on the

MiniOperas course from the perspective of HME composition studies, in particular, this article addresses the following question:

> *How can HME reclaim the public sphere in composers' professional education through a public pedagogy of dissensus in a multi-arts, transdisciplinary, and collaborative production of operas?*

The theoretically-oriented, retrospective, and dialogical co-exploration proceeds by first examining how MiniOperas interrupted the dominant conservatory tradition (e.g. Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013; Kingbury, 1988; Sarath et al., 2017; Westerlund & Barrett, in print) in composers' professional education by staging dissensus through social reorganization; second, by identifying *the specific ways* through which a pedagogy of dissensus emerged in the multi-arts collaborations; and third, by synthesizing the systems' change required for HME to institute public pedagogy in its craft-based, critical, and open-format mode. The analysis demonstrates the power of public pedagogy of dissensus in and through multi-arts collaboration to intervene social realities at least at two levels: the habitual ways of understanding the purpose and principles of composers' professional education, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, creating a more inclusive space for considering the possibilities of opera in contemporary society and, thus, to reconstruct the public image of opera. The first author of this article worked in the course as the composition teacher, and therefore has a full insider perspective on the process, whereas the second author, who works in the same university and has a background in HME research, only saw the final productions. The co-exploration aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on how a critical and responsible interconnection between musicians' art and society could be strengthened as part of professional education.

1. MiniOperas interrupting HME teaching-learning trajectories

Reframing opera studies

In scholarship, opera is conceptualized as a *Gesamtkunstwerk,* a term used by Richard Wagner in 1849 to refer to a combined or total artwork (Grey, 1992, in Hautsalo & Westerlund, 2021). With a specific location and time of performance, opera creates a public space, functioning as "a pluri-medial artform" (Wolf, 2005) to bring people together and construct a shared future (Risi, 2022). While still giving room for multiple meanings to be constructed, this shared future limits possibilities through the display of publicness through the performers, the physicality of the performance, the theme, content, arguments, aesthetic forms, and narrative modes. Each of these dimensions are also manifested in public communication about the performance, not only by the creators and performers but also by critics and researchers as well as the audience. Producing an opera in composition studies in HME may therefore be seen as a public pedagogy unto itself.

MiniOperas initially had several aims: to familiarize future composers, musicians, and other artists with the craft of opera creation; to challenge their possible negative assumptions concerning opera; and to experiment from their contemporary perspective with "the bewildering power this art form has always had on the emotions and minds of its audience" (Weiner, 2015, p. 727). In HME, teaching opera does not typically touch on the process of creating new operas; opera is taught through "facts of the lives of composers, lists of their operatic works, and illustrations of recorded 'highlights' – overtures and popular arias that are used to demonstrate the musical style of a particular composer or opera" (Hautsalo & Westerlund, 2021, p. 72), or by training singers and opera coaches through established, existing opera repertoire. MiniOperas' aim was different,

as it provided a collaborative space for transdisciplinary student groups to create and display *novel* operas to be performed for real audiences.

Since the HME academic year is too short to prepare a full opera performance including all of its phases, MiniOperas focused on potential ideas for future operas, with students concentrating mainly on the ideation, writing, and composition phases of the creation. For the course to be launched realistically, it had to be as light as possible, demo-like, without overloading technical, spatial, costume, and set design resources, which also require extra financial resources. The course began with a two-day seminar in Fall 2024 and continued with joint meetings and workshops throughout the academic year, involving in total about 64 persons, of which 51 were Uniarts students and 13 teachers. The students came from different academies and departments[1]: 3 studied composition, 5 classical singing, and one was in the opera correpetitor program; 6 studied dramaturgy, 6 theatre directing, and one stage production; one of the singers came from the Theatre Academy, and one from the Academy of Fine Arts. Altogether 17 musicians from classical music and music education as well as two conducting alumnis with non-degree, supernumerary student status joined the process at its latter stage. Eight students enrolled only in the introductory seminar. The course was organized a second time, and planned in collaboration with various Uniarts' educational programs. Three teachers from the musical theatre, directing, and composition fields were responsible for the planning and scheduling[2], and the other 10 teachers had less responsibilities.

The course's publicness was increased in the middle of the course, as the student groups were given the possibility to present their work-in-progress at the Musica Nova contemporary music festival in Helsinki in February 2025. In their presentations, the groups introduced short musical excerpts as well as the themes, synopses, and key questions behind the librettos of their upcoming opera demos. The artistic collaborations culminated in Spring 2025 in three final public performances at The Music Centre, the prestigious performance venue in Helsinki, where the three 25-minute operas, *Piggy Sparkle, Margaritifera margaritifera*, and *1994 San Marino Grand Prix* were premiered. The final three performances succeeded in attracting a wide and unusual opera audience, including many fellow students from the Theater Academy who visited the Sibelius Academy campus for the first time, professionals from opera institutions, staff from various educational programs, as well as curious opera followers.

Staging dissensus through social reorganization

Composing for real audiences already during professional studies is not rare, as such, since being in the public eye plays a significant role in building a composer's career. However, this general publicity may differ from the type that Biesta (2012) identifies as being central in public pedagogy, namely, the 'concern for publicness' and 'the concern for *the public quality of human togetherness'*. This kind of concern is not simply "about a physical relocation from the home to the street or from the *oikos* to the *polis*" (p. 693) – from HME practice room to a concert hall. Rather, it is first and foremost "a certain 'form' of interaction" (p. 686); "about the achievement of a form of human togetherness" (p. 693). Traditionally, this concern in composition studies is limited to the musical

[1] Established in 2013, the University of the Arts Helsinki (Uniarts Helsinki) consists of the Academy of Fine Arts, Sibelius Academy and Theatre Academy, providing the highest level of education in music, fine arts, performing arts and writing in Finland.

[2] The teachers were: Prof. Martina Roos (musical theater); Prof. Saana Lavaste (directing); and the first author, Dr. Riikka Talvitie (composition). The composition process was followed by several individual composition teachers, as two of the three composition students also showed their work to their regular composition teachers.

quality of the individual artistic outcome. MiniOperas provided an alternative way for the composition students to reflect the publicness, since access to the co-created public space was from the beginning also offered to students who studied classical singing or other instruments and musical genres, as well as to students of dramaturgy and theatre directing whose studies included libretto writing, opera composition, and opera directing.

Consequently, the overall process integrated collective multi-arts discussions, various materials (e.g. librettos and other texts), collaboratively produced music, singing, acting, and directing, thus exceeding the typical learning trajectories of composition students. The course steered the composition students out of their comfort zones towards a new collaboratively reconfigured understanding of what it is to be and act as an opera composer. Since the dominant approach in composition has a strong focus on craft skills in different musical styles and composition techniques, drawing from past and existing materials, its concern for publicness tends to be limited to seeking one's personal artistic voice while keeping the internal laws of music and the technical craft skills at the very center. The underpinning assumption of *L'art pour l'art,* with its expectation of the socio-political neutrality of HME, effectively narrows the pedagogical problems down to musical problems.

In MiniOperas, this approach was interrupted by the theatre students, in particular, who were more used to reflecting their art through interconnected societal and ethical problems. In this way, the course itself became "a form of human togetherness characterised by *plurality*" (Biesta, 2012, p. 693), in which both students and teachers were expected to become public pedagogues who are dedicated to critically reflecting on the publicness of artistic achievements. Such an interruptive pedagogy through staging multi-arts heterogeneity is, to use Biesta's words, not to be understood as the "opposition of interests or opinions… [but] the production, within a determined, sensible world, of a given that is heterogeneous to it" (Rancière 2003, p. 226, cited in Biesta, 2012, p. 693). It does not aim "to teach actors what they should be, nor to demand a particular kind of learning but to keep open the opportunities for becoming public", but rather to 'stage' dissensus in order "to introduce an incommensurable element… [to] act both as a test and as a reminder of publicness" (p. 693).

Considering the stubbornness of the conservatory tradition in HME, which according to Gaztambide-Fernández (2008) leads "students through a path of technical sophistication and the refinement of natural talent in relative isolation from the social world" (p. 253), composers' education operates under what Rancière (2010) has called "the logic of *police"* (p. 53, emphasis original): it guards musical quality through "patterns and procedures of ruling that are predicated on a given distribution of qualifications, places and competencies" (p. 53). It controls even the smallest nuances of musicians' skill development, selecting the modes of being, doing, making, and communicating, in this way lacking "new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time" (Rancière, 2010, p. 139). The one-to-one social organization in instrumental and vocal teaching minimizes collaboration between teachers and diverse student groups, including composers' education (Fornhammar & Hyytiäinen, 2025). Therefore, to test 'staging' dissensus and publicness, even literally, is demanding in this context and requires – both from teachers and students – *a radical shift of mindset*, new ways of acting, and letting go of conventional norms (e.g., reconsidering the exam and grading systems). In MiniOperas, the pedagogical space of dissensus became what Rancière (2009) calls "an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing its obviousness on all" (pp. 48–49). The composition students were not simply

developing their musical agency, fulfilling their specific role in the process; rather, they became political subjects who confronted sedimented HME practices and established mental models concerning opera production through a co-created concern for the quality of togetherness – importantly, both *during* the process and *in* the final performance.

2. The co-creation of publicness

Crossing disciplinary boundaries

According to Biesta (2012), "if we understand public sphere as a quality of human togetherness, then we might say that becoming public *is* the creation of public sphere" (p. 693, emphasis original). From this perspective, it is possible to think that any opera performance involves *the possibility of caring for* the quality of human togetherness. Traditionally, however, this care for quality has focused solely on the musical quality of the performance. For instance, the 19th-century opera repertoire, performed in established opera houses and often reproducing social power structures that are not widely acceptable in contemporary society, is considered to provide the quality of human togetherness by its artistic qualities and the virtuosity of singers. In MiniOperas, the multi-arts collaboration pushed the boundaries of this central idea in the *L'art pour l'art* ideology to the realms of the political where art has social consequences. The publicness and care for human togetherness were co-created through the pedagogical dissensus in multidimensional negotiations concerning the aesthetic and ethical choices, in which both students and teachers from multiple artistic disciplines were acting as disruptors of the established, traditional mental models.

Studies on collaborative projects at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama have identified, however, that the values, assumptions, and methods of learning and working in different art forms vary considerably, posing a particular challenge in HME (Ford & Sloboda, 2013). According to Ford and Sloboda (2013), one of the most significant differences between education in different arts practices is the relationship between the artist and the original text, or the notated score in music. Even in institutional opera productions, the work normally starts with fidelity to the score. Although in modern opera staging, the time and place of events are often recontextualized through directing and various stage decisions, the music is left untouched. Similarly, in contemporary theater, the text is more of a starting point than a reproductive goal to be adapted to reflect contemporary concerns. Moreover, as Ford and Sloboda (2013) note, in contemporary theatre the audience is conceived of as an essential part of the performance, whereas in concert practices for western art music the audience has traditionally, and often still (McPherson & Schubert, 2022), been assigned an extramusical role. Furthermore, while HME is largely based on the one-to-one teaching tradition, theater students mostly study in group settings, with continuous practice in collaborative working methods.

These differences between disciplinary norms and educational cultures were also evident in MiniOperas, elicited through student reflections on social values and the values of the opera in general. Initially, even the proposal to organize the course had come from earlier years' drama and directing students. While hoping for transdisciplinary collaboration between the arts academies, these theatre students curiously showed interest in the presumably elitist art form that was in their experiential periphery. Already during the introductory meeting, the theatre students wondered aloud about the prevailing 'policing' of the musical art form. They raised important topical and social issues non-typical in music studies (e.g. representation), and speculated as to why historical operas continue to be performed despite their outdated themes and their reproducing questionable power structures. "The hegemonic, status-quo, sociopolitical organization" (Reinelt, 2023, p. 174)

of opera was refreshingly interrogated when the students questioned the practice in which opera's creation and production phases are clearly separated from each other, and in which opera's creation is described as a process between the composer and the librettist (Heggie, 2015). They challenged the practice in which, almost always, classical singers, orchestra musicians, or conductors have no say whatsoever in the content, theme, libretto, or music, and in which other artistic staff (set designers, costume designers, and lighting designers) are not allowed to follow the writing or composing of the opera, or in which the proposal for the topic may come from the artistic director of an opera house or festival, or from a director or writer, while the composer may join the process only after the production and theme are already decided.

Because the students did not have a common understanding of how and what kind of opera performance was brought into existence, they first had to negotiate from various angles the overall 'police' under which they agreed to work. The clashing of different social and political backgrounds – dissensus – was in this way immediately staged in the course "by crossing boundaries and interconnecting forms and levels of discourse and spheres of experience" (Hallward, 2009, p. 141). To counter the hierarchies, MiniOperas facilitated equal opportunities for individual group members to participate in collective discussions regarding the starting point for the opera, and to cross disciplinary boundaries in their creative process. The course organization allowed experimentation with different solutions, including various musical forms of expression and visions for directing, and, for instance, the singers were given a relatively equal political voice as the composition students from the beginning.

Finding opera topics in dialogue

Already in the first workshop of the course, students had to negotiate, by sharing their thematic and musical ideas of what the opera would be about. After this session, each student wrote down a few students' names they would like to work with. Based on these choices, the teachers divided the students into groups; this time, each group was comprised of one composition student, two students of dramaturgy, and two from directing. The writing process continued dialogically, involving negotiations that were opened to the rest of the working group. This was reflected in the form of polyphony, stylistic diversity, and combinations of various materials and media. Unlike in music, theater students embraced opera's potential for carnivalesque and exaggerated musical and theatrical expressions. Due to this way of working, the starting points and emerging materials were not individualised in the same way as in the typical opera scriptwriting or composing process, which initiated the composition students' further discussion of necessary changes in contemporary operatic practice.

All of the themes of the three emerging operas were directly related to ecological responsibility and environmental sustainability: the first questioned the human-nature relationship; the second raised the issue of conflicting values between the forest industry and ecological activism; and the third, by using Formula racing as an example, dramatized the tragic consequences of extreme competitiveness and undue risk-taking together with its economic gain being the central value, which disregards in multiple ways the relational values in human ecosystems. In this respect, all of the themes emerged out "of the public" (Biesta, 2012) in the participating students' experienced realities and ongoing societal debates in Finland. The themes were developed within the working groups with no input by the teachers.

The first of these operas, *Piggy Sparkle*, was described by the students as "an anarchic and posthumanistic fable about motherhood and homesickness" (see Image 1). The topic was inspired by Viktor Kossakovsky's documentary film *Gunda*, which tells the story of farm animals. *Piggy*

Sparkle speculates on what might happen after the final scene of the film, in which human farmers separate the pig and her piglets. Piggy, a pink pet, is longing and looking for her mother, but instead encounters an AI-operating Chat (at the stage an open computer). The consequence of this encounter is a biologically impossible form of posthuman motherhood. The performance of *Piggy Sparkle* featured a diverse range of musical materials and employed puppetry techniques. Its composition process involved many forms of collaboration, the most essential of which was the use of improvisation as a compositional method. At the beginning of the process, the composition student and the main singer in the role of Piggy improvised the whole libretto, and the recording of that session served as material in the subsequent composing process. This type of working practice is already non-traditional, since composers tend to prefer making compositional decisions alone without consulting the performer while composing. Moreover, during the collaborative process, the practical question of what happens to the text when it is sung instead of spoken sparked a vivid discussion. This was influenced by the preconceptions expressed at the introductory seminar about whether the operatic expression can be taken seriously at all. The singer's role of Chat was tailor-made for a visual art student from the Uniarts' Academy of Fine Arts whose singing style brought an unusual but desirable blending of styles to the vocal parts.

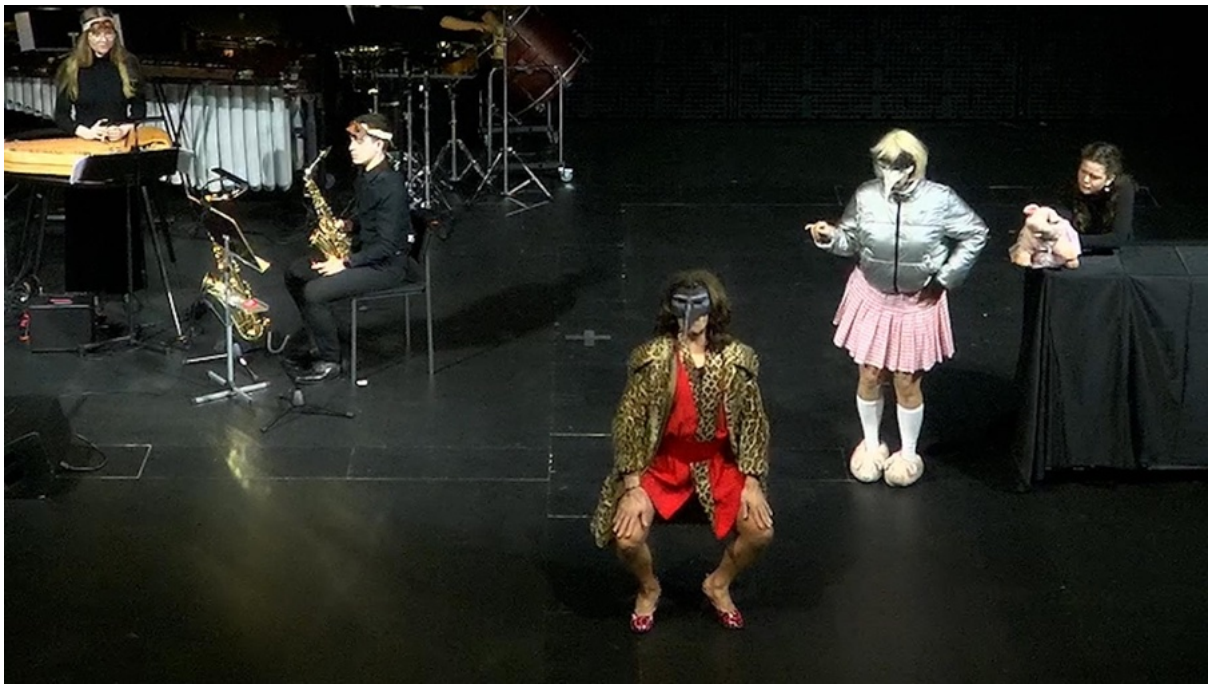


Image 1. Piggy Sparkle is an anarchic and posthumanistic fable about motherhood and homesickness. Screenshot from video recording.

The second opera, *Margaritifera, margaritifera*, was described by the students as "a dark and beautiful tale of clams and humans". The inspiration for this opera came from a natural environmental catastrophe in August 2024 in Finland, in which forestry machines had repeatedly crossed a creek where a population of highly endangered freshwater pearl mussels (*Margaritifera margaritifera*) lived. As a consequence, thousands of mussels that can live for over a hundred years under certain conditions died in this operation. *Margaritifera, margaritifera* tells this story in the

form of a fairy tale written in verse. On stage, a lumberjack driving a forest machine meets a biologist who studies the life of these rare shellfish (see Image 2).



Image 2. Margaritifera, margaritifera is a dark and beautiful tale of clams and humans. Screenshot from video recording.

The third opera, *1994 San Marino Grand Prix*, was built around the fatal accident that killed Formula 1 driver Ayrton Senna on May 1, 1994, at the Imola Circuit in Italy. In the program, the students describe it as "a high-octane tragedy". The opera was performed by two characters on the stage, Ayrton and Sid (FIA doctor Sid Watkins), exploring Ayrton's relationship with religion and winning, while also looking at the deadly crash through the eyes of his doctor and close friend, Sid (see Image 3). The libretto is entirely drawn from existing sources, including archived interviews of Senna and Watkins, formula race commentaries, literature on motor sports, and other archive materials, such as the medical records of Senna's death.



Image 3. 1994 San Marino Grand Prix is a high-octane tragedy. Through the focal point of Ayrton Senna's deadly F1 crash, concepts of sainthood, speed and spectacle are put into play. Screenshot from video recording.

Expanding established musical responsibilities

According to research, musicians have increasingly explored composer-performer collaboration in search of dialogue and long-term cooperation (Fornhammar & Hyytiäinen, 2025; Kanga, 2014; Roche, 2011; Östersjö, 2008). Research also highlights that composers can even be involved in creating the visual design and theatrical staging of performances (Groth, 2016). These relatively recent reports, however, reveal the persistent imbalance of authority between the composer and the performer. In MiniOperas, the composition students were therefore encouraged to seek out different performing roles, such as an improvising musician or composer on stage. After the librettos were sufficiently advanced, the three working groups conducted various forms of musical collaborations and tested the boundaries between diverse professional roles, opening possibilities for new contributions from all of the students, and in this way interrupting the hierarchies between composers and other musicians. For example, the composer of the *1994 San Marino Grand Prix* also sang the role of Ayrton Senna as a countertenor, and the composer of *Margaritifera, margaritifera* appeared in the role of a mussel in the opera performance. All three kantele (a traditional Finnish and Karelian plucked string instrument) players used a live electronics set, and both guitarists played also electric guitar, in *1994 San Marino Grand Prix*. One of the kantele/kokle players volunteered to serve as sound designer for the audio track, which was reminiscent of the recorded sports commentaries from the 1990s, thus approaching electronic music composing.

This heterogeneity, in which "we continuously bring new beginnings into the world through what we do and say", however, depends essentially on "how others will respond to our initiatives" (Biesta, 2012, pp. 687–688). In MiniOperas, the co-created equality among the students became a sensed quality in the final opera performance; however, the exceptionally expanding artistic role of some composers and musicians also initiated the question concerning shared authorship. As the

current music copyright policy in Finland focuses on works and does not provide sufficient tools to resolve the authorship of transdisciplinary, collaborative performances, the course therefore generated the idea of creating authorship guidelines together with the Copyright society for composers, lyricists, arrangers and music publishers in Finland (TEOSTO).

Co-teaching as a pedagogy of dissensus

Despite the high degree of student agency throughout the course, it goes without saying that public pedagogy does not erase the need for teaching. According to Biesta (2015), the essential aspect of *education* is not that students learn, but rather that "students learn *something*, that they learn it for a *reason*, and that they learn it from *someone*" (p. 76, emphasis original). This may seem unproblematic in HME, which indeed tends to be teacher- and repertoire-driven: the social organization of the conservatory master apprentice – the "patron-client system" with its hierarchical ranking of musical excellence (Kingsbury, 1988, p. 37) – defines who knows what is learned, why particular issues must be learned, and who is the best teacher for learning these issues. During the MiniOperas course, the students encountered several professionals beyond their specific expert area, all of whom had their own influence on the decision-making process. Already at the opening seminar of the course, students met representatives from various fields: a singer, a conductor, a director, a composer, a librettist, and an opera researcher. For instance, under the guidance of an opera researcher, the participants studied the libretto of John Adams' *Doctor Atomic*, paying particular attention to the intertextuality of the text. As some of the dramaturgy and theatre directing students had already familiarized themselves with the libretto, the obvious references were familiar to them. The participants, divided into several groups, then examined chosen references in more detail. Since the students came from various parts of the world, this joint examination brought surprising insights into the origins of the references, and the network of references and quotations started opening up concretely as a result of joint discussions. The fruit of this intertextuality is most evident in *1994 San Marino Grand Prix*'s libretto.

A transdisciplinary collaboration was also established between the three Uniarts teachers for whom the co-teaching also allowed various artistic ideas and experiments to emerge and to be used in the negotiations.[3] The teachers took a position of "neither an instructor nor a facilitator but rather someone who *interrupts*" (Biesta, 2012, p. 693, emphasis original), since their "teaching as dissensus", as Biesta describes, could be seen as "a way of asking the impossible" (Biesta, 2017b, p. 83): asking from the student something that cannot be predicted and prescripted. This act of teaching could be defined as allowing trust to emerge – where students "need to figure out what to do with this freedom" (p. 92). As Biesta notes, such a teaching requires that teachers "have faith in their students" (p. 94): it is "an orientation towards the unforeseen…, to what is not present, to what can be the object of hope and thus requires faith, but can never be a matter of knowledge or certainty…" (pp. 83–84). In the course, the introduction seminar exemplified artistic solutions, however, the course continued by leaving the space open for students' own ideas, in this sense asking for the non-scripted and non-predicted impossible.

Studies of co-teaching have emphasized having sufficient common planning time and administrative support from the institution (Nápoles, 2024). For instance, in this case, the planning process turned out to be difficult, as the different Uniarts' academies have fundamentally

[3] The teachers were responsible for recruiting students to the course from their own subject group. They planned the course together, both in advance and throughout the academic year, by taking into account each of their other responsibilities and university duties. During the course, they took turns in joint meetings and workshops, leaving freedom for the working groups to negotiate, based on students' diverse disciplinary backgrounds.

different principles for scheduling studies. At the Sibelius Academy, musicians follow a weekly schedule in which individual one-to-one lessons allow a considerable amount of daily private practice time, whereas at the Theater Academy, courses are carried out in intensive and project-like periods. However, despite the administrative challenges, the teachers wanted to reinforce certain common pedagogical aspects during the course, such as the importance of multidisciplinary cooperation and the multi-method approach to artistic collaboration, and to reflexively rethink *what*, *why*, and *from whom* participants can learn in such collaborations.

3. Towards integrating artistic freedom and public pedagogy in composers' professional education

MiniOperas aimed to interrupt the production of deeply-rooted values and patterns that define what is done and how things are done in HME in order to arrive at an expanded understanding of what is also obtained in professional education. Education must however be reconfigured, at least in certain respect, when engagements in socially responsible and ecopolitical activities are wished to be obtained. MiniOperas aimed to open the discussion, to follow Foucault (interview in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982), for future composers not just to "know what they do" and "why they do what they do", but also to know "what they do does" (p. 187) in HME, their profession, and present and future society. This kind of systems-aware discussion, we claim, increases the potential of contemporary composers to become responsible and ecologically aware agents in society – a goal that pertains to all professional education.

Altogether, MiniOperas can be seen as an experimental systems intervention in HME curricula, pedagogical practice, and the ways students' learning trajectories construct the 'whys', 'whats' and 'hows' of learning composition. Its pedagogy of dissensus exceeded the formal curriculum goals and co-created a reflexive space to break the preconceptions concerning opera as an artistic genre. Supported by imaginative teachers, the course released energy and lowered the threshold for risky experimentation while still aiming at high artistic quality. By engaging students jointly to enter in "an enactment of a concern for 'publicness'" and "the possibility of actors and events to become public" (Biesta, 2012, p. 693), the course pushed all of the participants to co-reflect their position as artists in the world – to reflect what the world "was asking of me, ... trying to say to me, … trying to teach me" (Biesta 2017a, p. 118).

From a systems perspective, the MiniOperas course demonstrated that a systemic shift towards collective concern for publicness is possible to generate in individual HME courses when there is a willingness to boundary-break among the teachers and an acceptance of heterogeneity among the participating students (see Figure 2). From an educational perspective, this kind of pedagogy of dissensus requires constant restaging in order to ensure that students have sufficient artistic freedom to engage in public spheres as well as sufficient time resources for the required negotiation. The MiniOperas performances showed, however, that this given freedom also generated considerable interest among the audience.

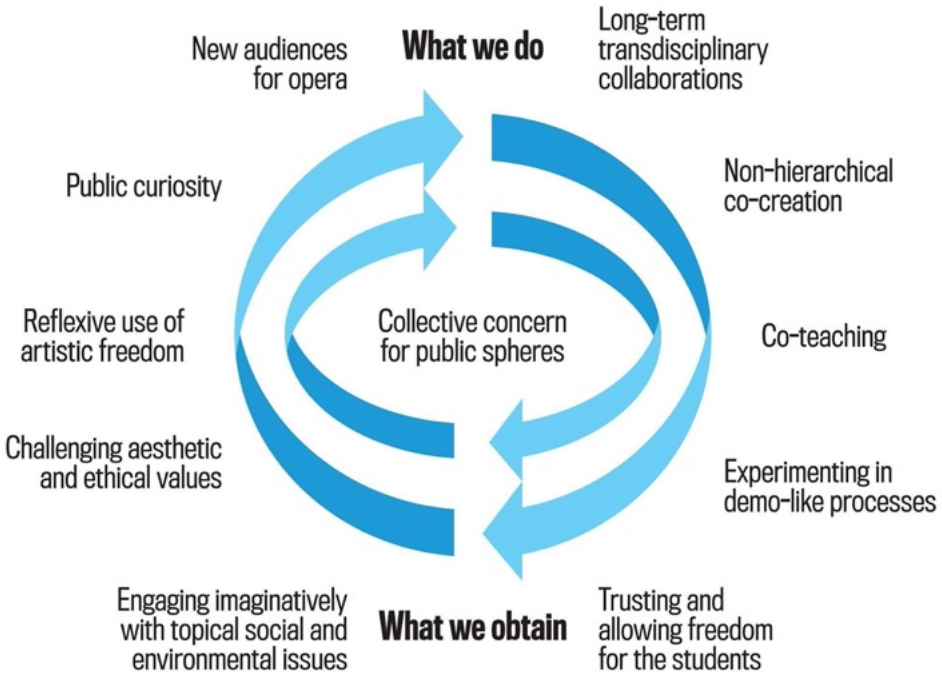


Figure 2. A systemic shift towards collective concern for public spheres is shown in the context of one transdisciplinary HME course. Source: Original.

Concluding afterword

This article has aimed to demonstrate, through the examination of a unique course, how composers' professional education can become public pedagogy through pedagogical dissensus. Similar activities could be organised within a wide range of transdisciplinary projects in other HME programs, which could indeed have radical effects on the conservatory-based HME culture that still largely underpins the idea of *L'art pour l'art*. In this case, the transdisciplinary and collaborative course showed that opera can serve as a natural and relevant platform for composers' political and societally oriented reflections, in this way allowing the positive benefits of education to be reflected beyond opera, for instance, in the field of concert music composition. Whilst the case of MiniOperas may not be globally unique, it was highly non-typical in the given context, in which composition studies have not previously included opera productions. Opera, with its singularly elitist reputation among all arts forms, provides an exceptionally fruitful space for dissensus and reflecting on the potential for composers to turn the cultural wheel through their own positioning.

The reader should note that in a small country like Finland, with its relatively short history of independence, composers and composition students carry the national romantic burden of representing the state-supported culture and identity construction (Kangas, 1999). Despite the more recent decline of composers' societal and public visibility (Westerlund & López-Íñiguez, 2024), and unlike most visual artists or performance artists who take a critical stance in society, contemporary composers are still often expected to participate in various national (even patriotic) celebrations (Talvitie, 2023). Considering that Finland is also a country where numerous new contemporary operas are composed every year (Hautsalo, 2021), and where opera is in many local communities the chosen dramatic format and label for participatory multi-arts performances

meant to reconstruct local identities (Hautsalo & Westerlund, 2023), it is of the utmost relevance for future composers to critically approach the influence of the past in composers' current public position, and to also raise the question of publicness in opera already during their professional education.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the project Music Education, Professionalism, and Eco-Politics (EcoPolitics), funded by the Academy of Finland (Grant number 338952).

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