

Open Outcry

An Opera Conceived and Composed by Alexis Kirke



Overview

A 45 minute “reality opera” on a stock market trading floor. Operatic performers have some initial stocks and money on top of their performance fee. They trade freely for profit through composed singing phrases and choreography. The conductor manipulates the market, hence the performers’ emotions. Accompaniment: solo cellist.

Motivations

- To produce a beautiful and exciting opera which utilizes the natural vocal effects of open outcry trading in stock exchanges and futures exchanges
- To show how great vocal beauty can emerge from a process many would think of as unmusical, and others may think of as morally questionable.
- To document in the arts a process which is at the heart of modern western societies, and a method of trading which is slowly being pushed into the history books by electronics

What Audience Will See

A Trading Floor



The stage will be turned into a mini-trading floor by putting barriers around the performance area to give the illusion of it being a trading pit. Around the barriers will stand three trading floor staff. They will probably be finance postgraduates who will keep track of performer trades, and umpire behaviour on the trading floor. They will wear costumes inspired by the clothing of staff at a real open outcry trading floor. One of the clearers will have a laptop on a small platform into which they enter information about what has been bought or sold on the trading floor (some of which will be fed to screens – described later).

Trader-performers

A trader-performer is an operatic performer on the stage trading floor who attempts to buy and sell stocks with other operatic performers. Trader-performers will wear costumes inspired by the bright costumes worn on real open outcry trading floor (e.g. a shirt and tie with a thin bright yellow jacket over the top). There will be 16 trader-performers on stage, spread across the vocal register. The trader-performers will come on to stage one by one at the start of the first act. And when a trader-performer has lost all their money, s/he will have to leave the stage.

Hand/Body Signals



As well as using their voice, a trader-performer will use hand and body signals to buy and sell stocks. These are used on a real trading floor so that even if you can't hear a trader clearly, you can still see what they're trading. Examples of those used on a real trading floor are shown above.

The trading performer signals used on stage in the opera will be devised by a choreographer to be both artistic as well as functional. They can also include more than just hand signals. So when a trader-performer uses their voice to try to buy or sell stocks, they can also make the body signals.

Screens

There will be some large screens around the stage. The screens have the following functions:

1. To show the trader-performers the state of the market, and the stocks in the market, and market news items, and the content of their portfolios.
2. To increase the illusion of the stage being a stock market trading floor.
3. To provide a platform for further visual creativity, interlacing with the functional elements of the screens. For example short video clips, stills, creative imagery etc, can share the screens with the stock and performer trader data
4. To let audience members see what is driving the market. Some of the data will not be of interest to them, but – for example - large text news items (“Gold plummets!”) will be.

The audience will see the trader-performers looking up at the screens and see their physical reactions to any emotional news (e.g. the trader-performers stocks have crashed, or have shot up in value).

Conductor

Between the screens and the stage will be an elevated platform where the conductor (the composer) stands. He will be wearing a suit and will have a laptop in front of

him. The laptop is used to control the stock market and the news items. At times he will also conduct a beat with one hand.

The conductor can also “suspend” the market at any time by hand signal and by putting up a signal on the screens. This does not silence the performers – but is an instruction for them to keep repeating whatever song they were singing and hand signals they were doing, at the same tempo they were doing it. During this time, the cellist has more freedom to work creatively. Also new screen content can be shown. The conductor can then unsuspend the market using hand signal and screens again.

Trader-performer / Clearer Interactions

When a trader-performer has bought and sold stock they tell one of the three clearer/umpires at the side of the stage. They do this by singing and hand signals as well. So the audience will see the trader-performers interacting with the clearers as well.

Accompaniment

There will be a cellist on stage just to the right of the conductor, so they can see the conductor and trading pit, but not the market screens. They will wear clothes similar in type to the type worn by the conductor.

Lighting

Stage lighting will be used creatively for the show. A lighting designer will be needed for the show. The lights could be linked to the market and trading activity – e.g. active market means more brightly lit trading floor, less active means more dimly lit, rising market means green/blue spectrum. Falling market means red spectrum. Stable market means neutral or blue spectrum.

Overall View

The overall view the audience will have initially is of a dark stage, then the screens come on, then the conductor comes into a lit up area and at the same time the cellist; the three clearers come into three lit up areas. Then the trading pit is lit dimly, and the cellist begins slowly bowing. The audience will see the first trader-performer walk calmly on, and then the second one walk on after 30 seconds – the pit lights get brighter. The traders walk out one by one. The trading will start and continue at different tempos and emotionality depending on the conductor and the buying and selling of the trader-performers. In the later parts of the show, trader-performers will begin to leave the stage as they lose all their money and stock.

When the end of trading is signalled, trader-performers will continue whatever trading songs and actions they were taking, in a loop, watching the conductor. The conductor will slowly end their singing, and the piece will end with the slow bowing of the cellist again and the lights dimming.

What the Audience will Hear

Trader-performer Tunes

A series of tunes will be composed with given pitch intervals, note rhythms and perhaps extended singing techniques. It is these tunes a trader-performer sings to buy and sell stocks. Different tunes will be composed for buying and for selling, and for different stocks. The trader-performers will also be taught methods of transforming the tunes depending on the amount of stock they wish to trade. In order to use a tune, a trader must repeat it a number of times. The tune can be sung in different registers, loudnesses and different tempos, and still function as the same trading tune.

If a trader-performer is offering to sell stock with a tune, then another trader-performer can agree to buy the stock by singing the same tune in the same tempo, but in a different register - but it must be a consonant harmony. The set of tunes will be carefully composed so that when the market is out of balance, there will *on average* tend to be more dissonance, and when the market is in balance more consonance. If the conductor is beating time with his hand (which he will not always do) then all traders must sing in some multiple or division of the beat.

Trader-performers will also have a specific tune they must sing if they have run out of money and stock and must leave the stage.

Trader-performer Words

As well as singing a tune, the trader has a series of sentences which make up the libretto. For every particular type of trade there will be a specific sentence which is used. The simplest would just be to get a trader-performer to use "buy 100 gold for 10 pounds". However the language will be more poetic and musical than this, in such a way that it will work in interesting ways when said/sung by multiple people at the same time. Also it can be changed by the conductor at different phases of the operatta by instructions on the market data screens over the stage. The conductor can also instruct all traders to speak rather than sing the sentences for a time.

Cellist

The cellist will be provided with a melodic, rhythmic and harmonic language by the composer, and will also have to follow the conductor's instructions. However apart from this, the cellist has some freedom in how they put together the language. The cellists function is purely musical. The melodic, rhythmic and harmonic language will be largely implemented in a post-minimalist way, but can also be used in an extended way (e.g. tapping body) and will have access to a loop pedal. At times the cello will be silent for periods, at others very active.

Opening / Closing Bell

At the start of the performance, once the conductor, clearers, cellist and first performer have come on, the opening bell will be rung before any music begins. At the end of the performance, the closing bell is rung. The performance will finish with the reverberations of the bell fading out in the theatre.

What Makes the Trader-performers “Tick”



Initial Holding

When a trader-performer comes on to the trading pit/stage, they will have been given a “bonus” of stock and of pretend cash. For example suppose that the singers’ fee they are being paid is £1000 pounds. As well as this guaranteed fee, they will be given £250 worth of stocks and money at the start of the performance. At the end of the performance, whatever value they have in stocks and pretend cash will be converted into vouchers (e.g. Selfridges) and given to them. So if they trade successfully and end up with £500 worth of stocks and £150 cash, they will be given £650 worth of vouchers. (When recruiting performers, they will be risk tested to try and only recruit performers who will trade.) This potential for loss and gain is what will drive the emotional behaviour of the performers – and is why Open Outcry is a “reality opera”. This is also why the conductor has power over the performers’ emotions, because he can cause the market to bubble and crash.

Market

Ideas for the artificial market will not be detailed here. However it will be designed between the composer, the financial markets consultant and the programmer. One key element in the market will be that it will be “zero-sum”. This means that for if one trader-performer makes a profit of, say, £300 – then some other trader-performers must make a loss totalling £300. This prevents the project funders from owing huge amounts of money to the trader-performers after the performance! One other element of the market is that as well as being driven by the conductor at a laptop, it is also driven by the supply and demand in trading of the trader-performers. This is

known as the “market impact” of their trades. Also a trader-performer is fined £10 by the clearer/umpires each time s/he breaks the singing/trading rules.

Stocks

The precise nature of the stocks has not been finalised. They could perhaps be commodities or commodity derivatives – like gold, silver, palladium, etc. Or it may be decided to do something a little more creative: e.g. stocks in certain composers, poets, art-forms, philosophies, cities, etc.

The current team for open outcry includes: a composer / conductor / co-librettist, a co-librettist, an artistic director, a financial markets consultant, cellist, choreographer, and video artists.