Critical Acts

Profound Connectivity

A Social Life of Music during the Pandemic

Gelsey Bell

The week of 9 March 2020 started off somewhat normally in New York City. Sure a State of Emergency had been declared, but classes were still in session, everyone was still riding the subway to work, and performances were still taking place as planned. It wasn't till Wednesday 11 March that a trickle and then a deluge of cancellations spread across the performance scene. Broadway shut down on Thursday 12 March and by the next day all other performance venues had followed suit. However, even as performances were being cancelled, rehearsals were continuing. As a Brooklyn-based professional musician, I was still crossing state lines for rehearsals in New Jersey through the end of the week. That Thursday I had lunch with my sister who was visiting from out of town. And Saturday I had a friend and bandmate over to my house to watch a movie. We were supposed to have two shows that day but they had been cancelled. By the next week both my sister and my bandmate were sick in bed with coronavirus and all my upcoming gigs had been cancelled or postponed. Some were quickly rescheduled (and then a few weeks later rescheduled again), some were put on a "let's wait and see" basis, and some were just gone forever.

New York performance enthusiast Barry Michael Okun's newsletter of performance recommendations entitled "Go Out!" had a strange week of being called "Go Out?" and has, since 16 March, been called "Stay In!" By 17 March live online performances, where the performers and audience gathered through digital platforms rather than in physical space, were already starting to be advertised. At first it was mostly performances that had already been happening online (such as Untitled Theater Company #61's *Performance for One* or Anonymous Ensemble's *Flight*), but before long live streams of awkward but love-filled recitals from living rooms and bedrooms joined in—a lot of solo work. Over the next week, I was introduced to Zoom, a now-ubiquitous videoconferencing software that has exploded in popularity, out of necessity, with the onset of quarantine. Little did I know how important Zoom's videoconferencing technology would be for music-making over the next few months, or how it would quickly become my primary performance venue, alongside musicians across the globe.

Telematic performance—live performance that uses telecommunication technologies to connect performers and audiences—is nothing new. Performances that use technologies have always developed alongside those technologies, be it the telephone, turntable, television, radio, or the internet. Performances that use videoconferencing software or are broadcast online have been a vibrant form since the

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1990s.[1] However, the major strides in telematic musical performance before the pandemic had mostly been confined to research in university departments that used specially designed software and superior on-campus internet speeds with low latency to connect a group of performers in a room to groups of performers in distant locations. Now what was a niche field for a fairly small percentage of privileged artists has become the general meeting ground for a vast majority of artistic communities. Rather than an artistic movement inspired by a new technology, the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have precipitated a historic shift in the social sphere of the performing arts, necessitating a general rethinking of how performance can interact with our lives on a practical basis and encouraging a critical mass of artists to adapt to the new circumstances by repurposing existing tools. Only time will tell if the connection between Covid-19 and internet performance will be as substantial and enduring as some believe it was between the Black Death and the printing press.[2]

As an artist enmeshed in the experimental arts, leaning heavily towards music but with substantial overlap in the theatre and dance communities, I experienced firsthand how performing artists in New York City—which by March 2020 became the global epicenter of the pandemic—reacted and adapted over the next few months. All of the performances I discuss were hosted by New York–based institutions or artists, though performers and audience members were located throughout the globe. They also all used Zoom either exclusively as a venue housing both artists and audience or as a staging space for interacting performers, with the output then broadcast onto another platform such as YouTube Live, Facebook Live, or Twitch. Telematic performance is not a substitute for in-person performance. There are many ways it fulfills economic needs in this moment, but anyone who has dipped their toes, fingers, or voices into its expansive pool has experienced its uniqueness as a form and venue of its own.

Tuning

Rather than adaptations of existing works forced into an online setting, a significant majority of the most memorable and moving online performances I have experienced have been works and events created specifically for the online medium in this historical moment. However, the first performance I "went to" on Zoom was an online rendition of Pauline Oliveros's *The World Wide Tuning Meditation*, initiated by the International Contemporary Ensemble and Raquel Acevedo Klein's Music on the Rebound festival and led by IONE, Oliveros's widow and frequent artistic collaborator, and Claire Chase, the flutist who founded the International Contemporary Ensemble. The success of the online version is a testament to the work's versatility on both musical and social levels. The participatory performance took place on Saturday, 28 March at 5:00 p.m. EST, a time perhaps chosen because it allowed all in North and South America to easily attend, as well as night owls in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa and early birds in East Asia. The *Tuning Meditation* is one of Oliveros's early sonic meditations, first published in 1974 and performed most likely hundreds of times over the past 45 years. Over the many decades of her active compositional and pedagogical career, it became a go-to means for leading audiences toward collective listening in a variety of social situations, from concerts to conferences to her legendary Deep Listening retreats. By 2007, she had developed a modified version of the original that she called *The World Wide Tuning Meditation*, which spoke to the decades

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1. See Dixon (2007) for a comprehensive overview of the early days of internet performance in the 1990s and early 2000s.

2. Some historians have connected the success of the printing press to Europe's economic transformation in the aftermath of the Black Death, in which the accumulation of inherited wealth into a reduced population and the new availability of cheap paper (in part due to an incredible accumulation of rag cloth left by the dead) supported a developing print culture. Johannes Gutenberg used already existing technologies developed in China and Korea to create his printing press in response to this increased desire for books among the bourgeoisie (see Van Doren 1991:152–54).

Figure 1. Pauline Oliveros's The World Wide Tuning Meditation *performed on Zoom, March 2020. (Screenshot by Raquel Acevedo Klein)*

of its performance and her continued use of it as an active practice (as well as a cheeky nod to the World Wide Web).[3]

As with many of Oliveros's *Sonic Meditations*, *The World Wide Tuning Meditation* can be performed by any group of people and requires no musical training. In concert settings, the piece is performed with the audience. The score starts:

> Begin by taking a deep breath and letting it all the way out with air sound.
> Listen with your mind's ear for a tone.
>
> On the next breath using any vowel sound, sing the tone that you have silently perceived on one comfortable breath.
>
> Listen to the whole field of sound the group is making.
> Select a voice distant from you and tune as exactly as possible to the tone you are hearing from that voice. (in Dewar 2011:85)

Participants are then asked to listen again to the group as a whole and sing a pitch that no one else is singing. Everyone then oscillates between listening and singing tones they hear from others and ones that they don't hear from anyone. "The piece ends by an unspoken consensus," Oliveros explained in 2011. "The *Tuning Meditation* has ranged in duration from 2 minutes to more than an hour and a half. The number of performers has varied from a minimum of six to 6,000" (in Dewar 2011:85). The concert with 6,000 participants took place at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in the late 1980s and amazed Oliveros with "waves of sound" (in Mockus 2008:54) wrapping the crowd in a large outdoor meadow. The Zoom performance had almost 600 participants, most sitting alone in front of individual computers with headphones pinpointing the sound directly into their ears. Rather than the physical rush of hundreds of voices generating a kind of sonic ocean for participants to submerge their entire bodies in, the sound of the online

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3. The differences between the two versions lie in the specifics of what participants are instructed to do, while the importance of using long tones on a single breath, tuning to others in the ensemble, and listening across a group remained consistent. To compare the two scores, see Oliveros (1974) and Oliveros (in Dewar 2011). Oliveros was also an early adopter and explorer of telematic performance. In fact, many of the most active composers and musicians in the United States in that field today were collaborators and students of hers (see Oliveros et al. 2009).

performance was thin, with only a few voices coming through at a time, and glitchy, with the full range of sound frequencies being gated, compressed, and distorted by the technological medium. The difference in the sonic texture of the piece when it is in-person versus when it is on Zoom spoke to the severe audio limitations that have been built into the platform.

Zoom is software created for business meetings and not musical performances. Its audio capacity has been designed to focus our ears on a primary speaker, support the intelligibility of spoken language, and cut down on background noise. To this end, it only allows three channels of sound to be audible at any single moment. So unfortunately in the *Tuning Meditation* we most certainly could not hear many hundreds of participants at once. The program has the ability to flip quickly between different Zoom channels, giving the illusion of more than three voices, but even with this feature the choral sound is diluted and there are simply fewer pitch options when listening for your next note. Zoom selects which audio channels it makes audible based on what are the loudest and most active sounds, selecting for consonants and privileging the busy nature of spoken language rather than consistent sounds, be they vocal, instrumental, or simply background hum. *The World Wide Tuning Meditation* is a piece consisting entirely of long tones sung on vowels, exactly the kind of sound Zoom has been designed to deemphasize. Because of this, the performance highlighted vocal beginnings. The audio software kept looking for what audio signal most resembled talking, constantly making audible the loudest vocal onsets, then moving on to another voice once the original one was emitted as a consistent tone. Those with better internet connections, louder or distorting microphones, and rougher voices were highlighted while the quieter and sinusoidal (bell-like) voices ended up not being heard—silenced by Zoom.

The performance was not musically satisfying in the ways I had previously experienced in-person, but it was incredibly satisfying socially (which, it should be said, has always been a significant part of Oliveros's intent). While in past performances of this piece I had closed my eyes and become lost in the vibrations of anonymous voices, here I could see

most participants from the live videos they (like me) were sharing. So even if I couldn't hear everyone, I could scan through little rectangles of faces and see friends, strangers, and beloved fellow artists from all over the world. After a distressing two weeks, during which more and more people I knew were getting sick from a virus that rendered singing extremely difficult, it was incredibly powerful to see hundreds of isolated and healthy individuals singing together, even if I only heard a few at a time. As Oliveros explained in an interview in the mid-1980s, the *Tuning Meditation* can be used "at times when people need something, like a memorial service, which is not a religious service but is a service for someone who has died. It's a good way for people to communicate and connect with each other without words and without being committed to some message that they might not be comfortable with" (in Duckworth 1999:175). The performance spoke to the social needs of the community to gather and interact with one another. The limitations of Zoom could do nothing to hinder that.

Akin to an orchestra collectively tuning before a symphonic performance, this rendition of the *Tuning Meditation* functioned like a collective tuning of the new music community to our new venue of Zoom. Online platforms create a unique acoustics based on intermingling multiple participants' locations and environmental sounds, as well as their equipment (microphone, interface, processing like added reverb or equalization), with the software's audio processing (which adds more layers of gating, equalization, and compression). For most humans, the perception of space is just as informed by the sonic as the visual (even if subconsciously) and learning how to move through a new space is an essential part of performing. Just as Hildegard von Bingen's songs were composed for the acoustics of medieval German churches and Billie Holiday's vocal style cultivated with the Shure 730B microphone, the music written for the internet now is being developed for its unique acoustical space. It is its own venue—just as Carnegie Hall, your local bar, and your living room demarcate different kinds of venues—with its own sonic character, encouraging a unique set of social behaviors. After this initial experience of tuning, composing for and performing in

this new space, as well as learning the best ways to listen, required a period of exploration.

Exploring

Most of my investigation and discovery of online musical space as a composer-performer initially took place in April and May 2020 with thingNY's *SubtracTTTTTTTTTT* and John King and Brandon Collwes's *Sonic Gatherings*. For many musicians, the biggest hurdle to music making in Zoom, besides the three-channel limit, is latency—the time delay between when you make sound and when others hear the sound. *Sonic Gatherings* took its model from the collaborative strategies of John Cage and Merce Cunningham, allowing for variable and unpredictable timing.[4] Latency is a simple fact of all commercially available internet sound platforms, with the time delay depending on the speed of your connection. A great deal of music that exists in the world necessitates making sounds at exact times—music that grooves with a beat or music that simply requires specific sounds being made at specific times. For many there is no music that they play or listen to outside of this regime. But with the latency of online live performance, as soon as you have two or more people playing music from separate locations, everyone experiences the precise moment things are heard and seen at different times. The music's temporality is stretched across listeners in an uneven shape, like a three-dimensional amoeba rather than a two-dimensional line in the space-time continuum. So it is not just an issue of there being a general time delay—that delay is slightly different for every individual. When performers play together in an online platform like Zoom and then it is broadcast on another platform like YouTube Live or Twitch, the audience will hear the latency exactly the same because they are all sharing the experience of the single video broadcaster, which unifies the audience experience. However, that is not the case for the performers.

Figure 2. Paul Pinto (upper left), Isabel Castellvi (upper right), and Gelsey Bell (below) perform Bell's "Less Alone" in thingNY's SubtracTTTTTTTTTT, *April 2020. (Screenshot by Gelsey Bell)*

There are, nevertheless, some types of music and aesthetic forms well suited to the live unpredictability of latency. Both *The World Wide Tuning Meditation* and the *Sonic Gatherings* thrive in a high-latency environment. Additional styles of music that do not necessitate entraining to a specific beat also work well, such as musical elements layering on top of a stable harmonic texture (a drone)[5] or the disjointed aesthetics popular in free improvisation. thingNY's *SubtracTTTTTTTTTT* is an experimental opera consisting of vignettes that explore a variety of ways to approach low latency.[6] thingNY is a

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4. Both King and Collwes had worked with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company as had many of the guest musicians and dancers. There were 16 *Sonic Gatherings* between March and July. I performed on *Sonic Gathering III*, *VII*, and *VIII* and attended three other performances as an audience member. Videos of most *Sonic Gatherings* are archived at www.youtube.com/user/kingbee9999/videos.

5. Using Zoom's "share audio" function, one channel of audio—be it live or prerecorded—can be added to a Zoom call free of the gating issues experienced by participants. Some composers have exploited this feature by playing a drone-like sonic bed underneath other musical elements. For example, this was used in Kamala Sankaram's *all decisions will be made by consensus*, which premiered on 24 April 2020, and thingNY's *A Series of Landscapes*, which premiered on 10 July 2020.

6. Documentation of one of the live performances is archived at www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFsMMqSuHyo&feature =youtu.be.

New York–based collective of composer-performers, of which I am one, who compose collectively—we are also the band that had two cancelled shows that fateful week in mid-March. *SubtracTTTTTTTTT*, which premiered on 24 April, was written and performed by Isabel Castellvi, Paul Pinto, Erin Rogers, Dave Ruder, Jeffrey Young, and me. One song that I wrote for the piece, "Less Alone," was performed by three singers (Castellvi, Pinto, and me) and consists of alternating solo lines and a rubato tempo that welcomes low latency as an effective dramaturgical technique.[7] It is almost as if the latency of online performance encourages rubato within individual phrases by unpredictably inserting fluctuating time delays between them. The lyrics of the song speak to being isolated from one another while experiencing the same global event and every glitch or distortion in the quality of the visual or audio emphasized this isolation. The singers finish and echo each other's sentences:

PAUL: I

GELSEY: I

ISABEL: I

GELSEY: Woke up

PAUL: In my

ISABEL: Own bed.

GELSEY: Another day

PAUL: Of quiet

GELSEY: Quiet

ISABEL: Quiet.

Between each utterance was a different length of time due to the unpredictability of latency, leaving space for the quiet we were referencing, while we sang together though not at the same time against a backdrop of differently shaped windows seen from the inside. Later, we would hocket the lyrics "we are all going through this,"

with a different performer singing each word. The song concluded with the phrase "I am less alone," which we sang in layered lines over each other. Inevitably the Zoom software would distort the sound, adding an electronic layer of musical storytelling that reminded us through timbre of the limits of going through the pandemic "together."

Another section of the piece, Castellvi's "How to Hold," involved two performers vocalizing breathing sounds and four performers singing slowly shifting harmonies. Like many of the segments in *SubtracTTTTTTTTT*, "How to Hold" grew out of an etude written to explore Zoom's capabilities and limitations. What had begun as singing long tones—like Oliveros's *Tuning Meditation*—became continuous repetitions of the phoneme "Nuh," using the "N" nasal consonant to perpetually reengage Zoom's attention. The six voices wove in and out of each other as performers fluctuated their consonant attacks and volume. Castellvi also choreographed physical gestures to cue the moves from section to section and the emotional build of the piece, rather than relying on sonic or temporal cues. In the online medium, it became clear to all of us in the group that in addition to the music, we needed to make decisions about the visuals—setting, camera angles, choreography, etc.—as an integral part of music creation. Erin Rogers's "Balance is Hard," which took place earlier in the piece, was another full-ensemble section that relied on performers responding to each other rather

Figure 3. The members of thingNY perform Isabel Castellvi's "How to Hold" in SubtracTTTTTTTTT, *April 2020. (Screenshot by Gelsey Bell)*

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7. "Rubato" indicates being outside of a strict tempo, slowing and quickening the progression of music at the discretion of the performer, while preserving the overall pace.

than all following a steady tempo. Drawing on a wide array of timbres—from saxophone key clicks and guitar strings untuning to bending vocoder pitches and the speaking voice—the music bounced between the ensemble members who act like jugglers, managing to be frenetic and even crowded despite Zoom's limitations. In addition to the sonic, Rogers used color and a piece of paper (a letter) passing from screen to screen, which eventually turned into a paper airplane, to reflect the musical structure. (We also worked with video designer Eamonn Farrell.)

Like many telematic performances of all eras, we embraced an aesthetic of technical difficulties as something supporting the dramaturgy of the piece,[8] to the point where during an early performance when we had to restart a section halfway through because of broadcasting issues, many audience members assumed the "inconvenience" was planned. Rather than an annoyance, these are often incredibly intimate and endearing moments. Making work for online environments is not just about sculpting the artistic object; it is also about creating new social rules and rituals for performers and audience. The unchartered nature of the new social situation impelled us to consider our presentation methods in new ways. We reassessed the preshow experience, an appropriate performance length considering "Zoom fatigue" (Sklar 2020), whether we should encourage the audience to use the "chat" feature, if the audience should be muted or have their videos on, how to handle bows, the use of "front of house" staff for each platform, and in what ways the experience can or should be monetized. Throughout all of these productions, the postshow conversation experience might range from a mix of talkback to social chitchat to awkward confusion as people slowly leave the call. Many events end with a deluge of communication in another form: texts, emails, and social media posts that fill the void of the absent postshow bar hang. But ultimately performers and audiences alike

were able to continue to nurture communal bonds even as we were physically separated. For thingNY, because we rehearsed regularly, performed, processed how it went, and then went on to create another online piece (*A Series of Landscapes* premiered on 10 July), ensemble music-making during the pandemic transformed into more than a passion and a profession. It became a coping mechanism in an expanse of precarity.

Being Together

As seasoned telematics composer Mark Dresser recently put it, "The human dimension of [telematic performance] has always been what's drawn me into it—the collaborative, the connection part. [...] The connectivity is really profound" (2020). For artists working this way, even though a substantial percentage of time may be focused on understanding and troubleshooting technology, the focus on "being with" others fuels the drive to struggle with the technology. Like the *Tuning Meditation*, Troy Anthony and Jerome Ellis's *Passing Notes*, which took place on 17 May, encapsulates this commitment to being together. Inspired by the passing of Ellis's grandfather in April and his family's inability to gather in memorial due to the pandemic, composer-performers Anthony and Ellis created a seven-part collaborative music-ritual based on the seven stages of grief. In the introduction to the event, they explained that their performance was not a substitute for the theatre or concert hall, but instead a service where they acted as healers, rather than performers, and where we all gathered, as Anthony said, "to do work." Throughout the event, participants shared video while muting their audio. We began by preparing our space, with Anthony and Ellis leading us through tasks, like lighting a candle, as well as sharing songs, poems, and thoughts. The gathering lasted for almost three hours. One section spoke to who we, like Ellis and his grandfather, were evoking and memorializing at this time. Each participant was asked to "rename" themselves

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8. For instance, choreographer Susan Kozel celebrates technological limitations as an essential aspect of telematic performance in the mid-1990s: "The moving images, as they spilled from analogue to digital, through the Internet, and back into analogue projection, took on traces on their journey: pixellation, delays, abstraction, overexposure. All the digital and analogue offerings became part of the physical dynamics of interaction" (in Dixon 2007:425).
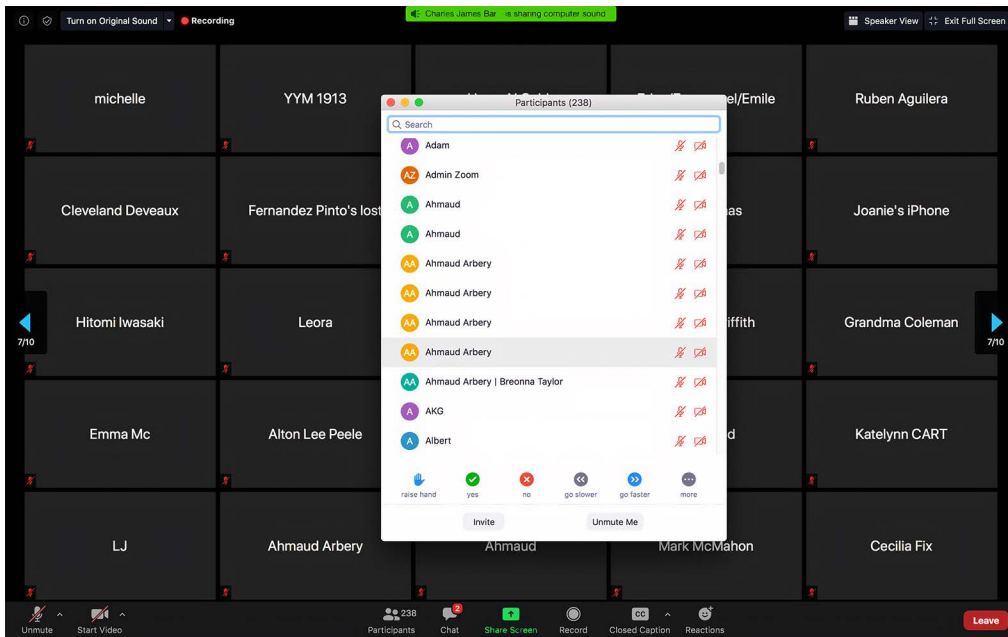
Figure 4. The virtual memorial wall created by participants in Troy Anthony and Jerome Ellis's Passing Notes, *May 2020. (Screenshot by Gelsey Bell)*

with the name of someone who had passed that they wished to focus on, and we were then instructed to turn our videos off and scroll through the many pages of names like a virtual memorial wall. The sheer immensity of names, shared by the over 200 participants, induced a cumulative emotional weight similar to the *Tuning Meditation*. Alongside the names of participants' family members and friends, multiple people named Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, two Black Americans whose tragic deaths continue to rock the United States, foreshadowing the immense anguish that would combust a week later upon the murder of George Floyd and the still ongoing Black Lives Matter protests. There were many reasons to gather for communal healing and it has only become more obvious how racial inequities and traumatic legacies have gone hand-in-hand with the tragedy of the coronavirus.

We were invited to breathe with Anthony and, as we moved to the next stage of grief, asked to "rename" ourselves again with some way that we wanted to live. Some answers were "fight," "courage," "listen," and "freedom (for all, for real)." There was a palpable sense that

the community, a cumulative social desire from all participants, was on view. The event wasn't about virtuosity or raising money–though Anthony and Ellis are virtuosic musicians and suffering from the same financial constraints as most in the artistic community. Instead, it was about being sincerely in the moment with the other participants. Our hosts' songs and tasks transcended sound quality or confusion over Zoom's features, because the goal was being together in our grief. The heart of every online performance during these tragic and confusing spring months, particularly for the many of us based in or in orbit of New York City, has been using music to achieve a resounding desire to connect.

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Hadestown

Nontraditional Casting, Race, and Capitalism

Nia Wilson

Hadestown, the 2018 Tony Award–winning Broadway musical written by Anaïs Mitchell and directed by Rachel Chavkin, is one of many creative reinterpretations of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In the ancient Greek legend, Orpheus, a fabulously talented musician, journeys to the Underworld in order to bring his dead wife Eurydice back to life. Moved by Orpheus's music and love for Eurydice, Hades, God of the Underworld, strikes a deal: Orpheus may leave with Eurydice, but he cannot look back to check if she is following until both have emerged from the Underworld. Orpheus loses faith and looks back at the last minute, dooming Eurydice to the Underworld forever.[1]

The creative seed for *Hadestown* was Anaïs Mitchell's 2006 DIY performance in Vermont that in 2010 became an album of the same name. Mitchell, a singer-songwriter and guitarist from Vermont, is known for her genre-bending, narrative-driven folk-jazz blend. In 2013, Mitchell partnered with Chavkin to refashion the album as a musical. The production brings to life factory labor and a New Orleans traditional music venue, like Preservation Hall, as it builds on the album's themes of climate change, labor exploitation, and sexual manipulation.

Hadestown raises the stakes of Orpheus's quest by including social and environmental change, not simply lovers united and then

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1. *Please see Richard Schechner's "The Director's Process: An Interview with Rachel Chavkin" in this issue of TDR. —Ed.*

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