

## RESONANT NARRATIVES: THE POWER OF HYBRID COMPOSITION

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### Abstract

*This research explores the transformative potential of hybrid composition as a vehicle for compelling storytelling in 21st-century opera and vocal music. By integrating diverse musical languages—from Western classical traditions to experimental and popular forms—it investigates how stylistic and cultural hybridity can deepen emotional resonance and expand narrative possibilities. At the heart of this inquiry is the belief that genre-fluid composition invites heightened listening, where familiar expectations are disrupted in service of empathy, insight, and emotional impact. Drawing on theoretical frameworks by scholars such as Nigel Fabb and David Huron, who emphasize the roles of expectation and surprise in affective response, this study proposes that musical hybridity can amplify intensity and render complex or confronting narratives more accessible.*

*The research is undertaken through a triadic lens: composer, performer, and scholar. This intersectional perspective foregrounds the multiplicity of voices—personal, cultural, and artistic—that shape the creative process, and it reflects on how collaborative devising, improvisation, and studio-based techniques contribute to a more porous and dynamic compositional practice.*

*As a case study, my original chamber opera 'Menarche' is examined. The work investigates intergenerational trauma and the female body through layered vocal textures, extended techniques, and improvisation within notated frameworks. Fusing music, text, performance, and design, 'Menarche' constructs an immersive storytelling environment that exemplifies the emotional and conceptual power of hybrid operatic form.*

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## Keywords

*Hybrid Composition, Contemporary Opera, Performer–Composer Practice, Multidisciplinary Storytelling, Music and Narrative*

## Introduction

Passionate about connection and impact through storytelling, my research investigates how hybrid approaches to 21st-century vocal composition and staged dramatic works might most effectively bring chosen narratives to life—particularly those that engage with challenging themes such as mental illness and trauma.

This investigation is rooted in the theories of ‘Permissions’<sup>78</sup> and ‘Affordances’<sup>79</sup>. As a singer, performer, and composer who has worked across a broad range of genres—including traditional opera, new music, experimental pop, early music, jazz, and musical theatre—I am interested in exploring multiplicity in terms of musical style, compositional technique, and creative perspective.

Through the creation of three major compositional works, I will be striving to answer the following questions:

1. *How might a hybrid approach to composition, including the use of contemporary production techniques and values, expand the sonic possibilities available to me and in turn, invigorate the art of storytelling?*
2. *How might a hybrid approach to composition create strong emotional responses by both disarming and surprising an audience?*
3. *How might multiple perspectives – as both composer and performer – mutually inform each discipline resulting in a more cohesive and thorough creative process?*

## 1. The essence of hybridity: a conceptual and creative framework

At the core of my research is the concept of hybrid approaches to composition. The term hybrid, along with eclecticism, fusion, polystylism and collage, all have various connotations, and depending on the source can be both positive and negative<sup>80</sup>. Schnittke’s essays on Polystylism go some way in defining various hybrid approaches<sup>81</sup>, and Jeremy Mayall

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<sup>78</sup> Rutherford-Johnson, Tim. *Music after the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Gibson, Eleanor Jack, and Anne Danielson Pick. *An Ecological Approach to Perceptual Learning and Development*. Paperback. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

<sup>80</sup> Furxer, George. “Between Musical Chairs: A Case Study in Eclecticism”. Sydney Conservatorium of Music The University of Sydney, 2022.

<sup>81</sup> Alfred Schnittke, Alexander Ivashkin, and J. D. Goodliffe, *Polystylistic Tendencies in Modern Music*, A Schnittke reader, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

uses culinary examples when describing different terminology. Eclecticism is a tossed salad with random ingredients thrown together, easily separated out again. Where hybridity is more a stew with the different ingredients fused together, unable to be separated without destroying the dish<sup>82</sup>.

While the words used by various sources vary, they are largely framed within contexts of traditional music history, used to describe a practice where materials are borrowed, juxtaposed or 'played with from afar'<sup>83</sup> as a means for innovation or rebellion against certain genre boundaries or expectations, particularly in relation to the term 'postmodernism'<sup>84</sup>. In my research, I'm interested in exploring hybridity in relation to 'enablement and inspiration'<sup>85</sup>, 'permissions'<sup>86</sup> and 'affordances'<sup>87</sup>, defining a 'primary practice'<sup>88</sup> of personal curation guided by the given narrative and context of the work (Art Song, Choral work, or Chamber Opera). As such, I have 'permission'<sup>89</sup> to choose various combinations of compositional techniques and musical styles to invigorate a narrative while exploiting my own 'affordances'<sup>90</sup> of a dynamic and multifaceted composer/performer perspective across a range of musical genres and styles.

I am exploring hybridity in the following areas:

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<sup>82</sup> Mayall, Jeremy. "Cross-Genre Hybridity in Composition: A Systematic Method." *Organised sound: an international journal of music technology* 21, no. 1 (2016): 30-39.

<sup>83</sup> Emmerson, Simon. "Where Next? New Music, New Musicology." Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 2007 Electroacoustic Music Studies Network Conference, 2007.

<sup>84</sup> Rutherford-Johnson, Tim. *Music after the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017.

<sup>85</sup> Rutherford-Johnson, Tim. *Music after the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017.

<sup>86</sup> Rutherford-Johnson, Tim. *Music after the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017.

<sup>87</sup> Gibson, Eleanor Jack, and Anne Danielson Pick. *An Ecological Approach to Perceptual Learning and Development*. Paperback. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

<sup>88</sup> Emmerson, Simon. "Where Next? New Music, New Musicology." Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 2007 Electroacoustic Music Studies Network Conference, 2007.

<sup>89</sup> Rutherford-Johnson, Tim. *Music after the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Gibson, Eleanor Jack, and Anne Danielson Pick. *An Ecological Approach to Perceptual Learning and Development*. Paperback. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

### 1. 1. Hybrid Styles

As my career has traversed a wide range of different musical styles, I have gained a deep respect and passion for many different types of music. Different genres offer different strengths and when aiming for the most effective way to bring to life a narrative, I look for the strongest musical characteristics to achieve that, regardless of genre.

Unlike the more traditional approaches to hybridity and eclecticism mentioned above, my intention is to harness multiple musical styles in an authentic way to benefit completely from each genre. As such, I am not aiming to be merely influenced by various styles as with Schnittke's definition of eclecticism<sup>91</sup>. An example of this is Karen Tanaka's 'Techno Etudes'<sup>92</sup> for piano which incorporates key elements from techno including rhythm and speed, but which has no actual technology, drums or other authentic techno elements, resulting in a purely acoustic piano piece inspired by techno. Rather, I am aiming to seamlessly blend authentic elements from multiple genres, as in Missy Mazzoli's 'Vespers for a New Dark Age: I. Wayward Free Radical Dreams'<sup>93</sup> where she combines strings and woodwinds with synthesisers, drum kit and contemporary pop sounding vocals and lyrics, resulting in a convincing form of self-expression through personal curation, as opposed to any kind of statement on hybridity as a shocking or innovative musical movement.

### 1. 2. Hybrid Techniques

Each genre has its distinct sound, characteristics, and associated compositional techniques. Navigating multiple genres requires using various methods, from programs like Logic Pro and Ableton Live to traditional notation and Sibelius. These varied techniques can powerfully enhance the portrayal of a narrative in different ways. In my exploration, I'll combine and leverage these methods, seeking to amplify the sense of multiplicity in my compositions and draw essential elements from each genre using their authentic techniques.

### 1. 3. Hybrid Perspectives

The composer has immense ability to create an impactful work that combines text and music to bring to life a narrative in a musical work through the craft of composition. So too the performer, as interpreter and

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<sup>91</sup> Alfred Schnittke, Alexander Ivashkin, and J. D. Goodliffe, *Polystylistic Tendencies in Modern Music*, A Schnittke reader, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

<sup>92</sup> Tanaka, Karen. *Techno Etudes*. Track #1 on 'Amsterdam x Tokyo', Spotify, 2000.

<sup>93</sup> Mazzoli, Missy. *Vespers for a New Dark Age: I. Wayward Free Radical Dreams*. Track #1 on 'Vespers for a New Dark Age', Spotify, 2015.

deliverer of the narrative and music, plays a major role and can have significant power over how a musical work impacts an audience. It serves to reason then that creating a work as both the performer and composer, where each role influences the other in a fluid way, enhances the art of storytelling by harnessing a double lens, elevating my ability to effectively bring to life a narrative through increased insights.

## **2. The power of hybridity: affective and narrative functions**

This section explores the affective and narrative functions enabled by hybrid compositional approaches, focusing on three key capacities: the ability to surprise, to disarm, and to expand sonic possibility. These capacities are examined here as core affordances of hybridity, offering powerful tools for audience engagement and emotional impact. They also serve as the practical and conceptual bridge to the compositional methodologies employed in my case study of *Menarche*, discussed in the following section.

### **2. 1. Ability to Surprise**

The foundation for this idea is suggested by Nigel Fabb and David Huron's research into strong emotional responses garnered from surprise<sup>94</sup>. Fabb and Huron conclude that in order to surprise, an expectation needs to be established<sup>95</sup>. Considering this, hybrid approaches to composition where boundaries are constantly crossed, offers immense ability to utilise the element of surprise by establishing one style or genre expectation, then introducing a seemingly unrelated sound or style. In my research I will explore various ways of doing this, including gradual transitions and sudden ones, obvious and more subtle ways, to see how each approach might invigorate the narrative in different ways.

### **2. 2. Ability to Disarm**

As a singer, performer and composer, audience connection is central to my craft. I seek interactive exchanges over distant presentations, employing hybrid compositional methods that encourage listeners' openness and willingness to emotionally engage.

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<sup>94</sup> Fabb, Nigel, and Jstor. *A Theory of Thrills, Sublime and Epiphany in Literature*. Anthem Studies in Bibliotherapy and Well-Being. London: Anthem Press, 2022.

<sup>95</sup> Huron, David Brian, and Inc ebrary. "Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation." In *A Bradford book*. 1st pbk. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006.

Utilising hooks and riffs<sup>96</sup> with tools like Logic Pro and Ableton Live have been effective in establishing firm connections by fostering expectation and familiarity.

I'm delving into the use of 'kitsch'<sup>97</sup> as a potent vehicle for storytelling, especially for narratives that deal with challenging and taboo themes such as serious forms of mental illness. Kitsch, used as a concept rather than a stylistic characteristic, allows me to establish a deceptive sense of safety, setting the stage for stark contrasts between narrative and music that underscore the gravity of a story.

Exploration of rhythm and groove is another dimension of my work in disarming. I am intrigued by the visceral power to elicit physical responses, beyond the auditory to the tactile realm, ensuring an embodied experience.

### **2. 3. Expanded Sonic Possibilities**

Employing a hybrid approach to composition significantly expands the scope of sonic possibilities when seeking to bring to life a narrative through music and sound. In addition to the endless possible styles, instrumentations and compositional approaches of a hybrid practice within traditional compositional contexts, methods such as contemporary production techniques offer further opportunities in terms of manipulating, distorting and/or affecting the sounds either in a live or pre-recorded environment. The personal curation of these sounds and/or methods is always informed by the chosen narrative and aims to authentically harness various styles and approaches for their unique storytelling potential.

### **3. Methodology and case study: *MENARCHE***

This research is grounded in practice-based enquiry, with a focus on how hybrid compositional approaches can invigorate storytelling—particularly within narratives that engage with complex, taboo, or emotionally charged themes such as mental illness, menstruation, intergenerational trauma, shame, and violence against women.

Through the composition and staging of three major original works, this study explores the aesthetic, narrative, and emotional potential of hybrid techniques, including the integration of traditionally notated

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<sup>96</sup> Byron, Tim, and Jadey O'Regan. *Hooks in Popular Music*. Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2022.

<sup>97</sup> Ngai, Sianne. "Our Aesthetic Categories." *PMLA* 125, no. 4 (2010): 948-58.

forms, improvisation, and contemporary production tools. This section focuses on one of these works, *Menarche*, as a primary case study.

### 3. 1. *Menarche* (Chamber Opera)

*Menarche* is a 20-minute chamber opera featuring an original libretto by Rebecca Duke and Karina Young. It is scored for five female solo voices, a female trio (SSA), mixed ensemble (SSAATTBB), chamber orchestra, and improvised drum kit. The work premiered at the Parade Theatre in Sydney, Australia, on Monday 28 October 2024. It was performed by students from the Opera School and Contemporary Chamber Orchestra at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, in collaboration with writers, designers, and production teams from the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA). The production was directed by renowned Australian opera director Lindy Hume.



*Image no. 1 – ‘Menarche’, Scene 1, photo credit Jacqui Manning*

Through a dynamic blend of fully notated composition and improvisation, *Menarche* explores the tension between feminine freedom and patriarchal constraint. Its hybrid musical language—combining traditional scoring with improvised gestures, extended vocal techniques, and contemporary production methods—was crafted to deepen narrative impact and engage the audience through emotional immediacy. These compositional choices were informed by a desire to disarm and surprise the listener, creating space for deeper connection to the opera’s themes.

At the heart of *Menarche* is a return to the Divine Feminine and a re-engagement with cyclical knowledge—both physiological and spiritual.

The opera foregrounds the symbolism of cycles: of menstruation, of nature, and of ancestral transmission. It addresses the weight of stigma, shame, and taboo passed from mother to daughter, society to women, and peers to girls. Through its sonic, narrative, and visual language, the work challenges reductive stereotypes, confronts the cultural silence around female experience, and calls out the normalisation of violence against women. Ultimately, *Menarche* seeks to reverse intergenerational trauma by re-storying these experiences as sources of power, reclamation, and transformation.

### 3. 2. Expanded Sonic Possibilities

One of the key innovations in *Menarche* is the integration of an improvised drum kit into a fully scored orchestral setting. This deliberate juxtaposition of structured and free elements mirrors the opera's central theme: the intuitive, feminine spirit struggling against the confines of a rigid, patriarchal system.

This tension is amplified through the use of contemporary production techniques. Pre-recorded, spatialised spoken word fragments act as internal monologues, disrupting the operatic flow and blurring narrative time and identity.



Image no. 2 – ‘Menarche’, Scene 1, photo credit Jacqui Manning  
 Musical example no. 1 – Jessica O’Donoghue, ‘Menarche’, Scene 1, time marker 0:17  
 – 1:29, <https://youtu.be/ehhubRrFMK8?si=l7nRDILjLuvvqVNR&t=17>



Over the course of the opera, the drum kit evolves from a pulsing, jazz-influenced palette to a more aggressive, electronically processed sound world. This sonic transformation reflects the protagonist's emotional arc—from suppression and shame to resistance and reclamation.

Digital effects such as delay and reverb on acoustic instruments further evoke the presence of the Divine Feminine—distant, ancestral, and otherworldly.



*Image no. 3 – ‘Menarche’, Scene 3, photo credit Jacqui Manning*

*Musical example no. 2 – Jessica O'Donoghue, ‘Menarche’, Scene 3, time marker  
13:30 – 14:14, <https://youtu.be/ehhubRrFMK8?si=S9qDmBFK3GqLMUL&t=809>*

### 3. 3. Disarm

In *Menarche*, the drum kit plays a key role in disarming the audience through rhythm and groove. At key moments, steady rhythmic patterns provide a sense of grounding, inviting a more embodied and receptive listening state. In a work that often explores discomfort and vulnerability, rhythm becomes a subtle form of reassurance.



Image no. 4 – ‘Menarche’, Scene 2, photo credit Jacqui Manning  
 Musical example no. 3 – Jessica O’Donoghue, ‘Menarche’, Scene 2, time marker 8:52 – 10:40, <https://youtu.be/ehbubRrFMK8?si=d14jrISHhle2VCUo&t=532>

Recurring motifs—like the *moon theme* and the *empowerment mantra*—also serve to disarm through familiarity. These hooks return throughout the opera, each time slightly transformed, offering emotional continuity and anchoring. The full empowerment mantra is withheld until the final scene, when all the women sing it together in a cyclical round—marking a moment of collective reclamation.



Image no. 5 – ‘Menarche’, Scene 2, photo credit Jacqui Manning  
 Musical example no. 4 – Jessica O’Donoghue, ‘Menarche’, Scene 2, time marker 20:22 – 21:40, <https://youtu.be/ehbubRrFMK8?si=Lmf35Tz03yZDhOcj&t=1221>

### 3. 4. Surprise

Surprise plays a crucial role in shaping the audience's emotional response. The improvised drum kit itself is an immediate disruptor of operatic expectation. While often used to establish rhythmic stability, it is equally capable of unsettling—interrupting grooves and destabilising pulse to introduce tension and disorientation.



*Image no. 6 – ‘Menarche’, Scene 2, photo credit Jacqui Manning*  
*Musical example no. 5 – Jessica O'Donoghue, ‘Menarche’, Scene 1, time marker 3:49 – 4:15, <https://youtu.be/ehbubRrFMK8?si=FXmbS57trvMEYc-c&t=229>*



*Image no. 7 – ‘Menarche’, Scene 3, photo credit Jacqui Manning*  
*Musical example no. 6 – Jessica O'Donoghue, ‘Menarche’, Scene 2, time marker 16:46 – 17:20, <https://youtu.be/ehbubRrFMK8?si=AkMS2NegBacuspmT&t=1005>*

Surprise is also heightened through digital interventions. Spatialised, pre-recorded voices interrupt the musical texture at emotionally charged moments—such as scenes of shame and ridicule—mirroring psychological rupture and triggering visceral audience responses.

## Conclusion

Through hybrid approaches to composition, this research aims to contribute meaningfully to the evolution of opera in Australia—and beyond—by creating new works that reinvigorate the art of storytelling. By disarming and surprising audiences, hybrid composition opens up new emotional pathways, inviting deeper connection and sustained engagement with the operatic form.

This study positions hybridity not only as an aesthetic strategy but as a compositional methodology—one that embraces multiplicity across style, technique, and artistic perspective. By integrating traditionally notated music with improvisation, digital production tools, and the embodied knowledge of the performer-composer, a new creative language emerges: one that is flexible, affective, and uniquely capable of holding complex, challenging narratives.

*Menarche* serves as a case study in how hybridity can expand sonic possibility and disrupt inherited conventions in order to confront stigma, reverse trauma, and centre the female experience. The work demonstrates how hybrid practices can be used not only to amplify voice, but to reclaim agency—both artistically and thematically.

Ultimately, I advocate for a reimagining of opera as a multidimensional space—fluid in form, inclusive in content, and responsive to the lived experiences of today. In this space, performers can embody evolving narratives, audiences can engage viscerally and intellectually, and opera itself can continue to transform as a living, breathing art form.

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