

# Through the Fabric of My Own: Louise Alenius and Embodied Interrelationality

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*Several manners of being or of living can find their place in the ruins or the broken instruments which I discover, or in the landscape through which I roam.* (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 405)

“I want the music to be visible on their skin.”

*Feet.*

The nebulous drone of a viola and cello emerges within the performance space, intermittently punctured by the intrusive tearing of white gaffer's tape. As discreet variations arise in instrumental timbre and texture, the performers' legs and feet are, ostensibly unbeknownst to them, systematically bound to their chairs.

*Ankle.*

The melodic material of the viola and cello progressively intensifies in tempo, rhythm, and dynamics, as a pair of hands commences an exploration of the cellist's ankle. Softly tracing the contour of the bone, the fingertips linger achingly upon the surface, and gradually proceed upward.

*Skin.*

A violent slap on the cellist's leg is briskly succeeded by abrupt viola and cello pizzicati. Soon, the hands transfer to the violist's thigh. Repetitive triplet figures emanate from the viola, incessantly swelling and dissipating, as fingernails sink deeply into the violist's skin and scratch lines vehemently, rendering the gently pale flesh inflamed, raw, and subsequently, bruised. These abrasions, the embodied remnants of said submissive torment, lingered upon the performers' bodies for several days following the performance, and only worsened in appearance, devolving in color from an effulgent red to a blackened blue. Though the pain itself had largely subsided, cellist Karolina Öhman nevertheless documented the transformation, photographing the various blemishes and contusions on her body: “The first time we did it, [Karolina] was blue for five days, and she sent me pictures of blue body parts... Perhaps I need to change the title” (Alenius 2017a).

This amusingly wry remark from Danish composer Louise Alenius,

The image shows a musical score for three staves, likely for violin, viola, and cello/contrabass. The score is in 4/4 time and begins at measure 102. A box labeled 'SKIN' is positioned above the first staff. The first staff has a 'pizz' instruction and a fermata over a note. The second staff has a 'pizz' instruction and a fermata over a note. The third staff has a 'pizz' instruction and a fermata over a note. Below the third staff, there are instructions: 'hard slap on cellist's (bare skin - choose arm or leg)', 'hands on skin - slide slide slide', and 'Dschhh'. The dynamic marking 'fff' is present in all three staves.

**Figure 1.** *Rouge*, mm. 102–105. Words and Music by Louise Alenius. Copyright (c) 2016 by Edition Wilhelm Hansen AS, Copenhagen. This arrangement Copyright (c) 2019 by Edition Wilhelm Hansen AS, Copenhagen. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard LLC.

who perpetrated these staged acts of violence upon the performers, not only reflects an unforeseen prolonged aftereffect of the performance itself, but also encapsulates the extreme measures that Alenius, Öhman (or, in another performance, cellist Lea Emilie Brøndal) and violist Mina Fred were willing to enact and endure. Congruously entitled after the performers’ reddened and bruised skin, *Rouge* provokes an unusually intense encounter between the composer and performers. Though presented as one uninterrupted stream, the musical score itself is divided into multiple segments designated by a specific bodily area to be affected, or somatic action to be committed, by the composer: “Feet,” “Skin,” “Nails,” etc. (Alenius 2016). Alongside musical notation for the violist and cellist, each of these segments include meticulous stage directions for the composer to enact during a performance: “Work cellist’s forearm, pushing fingertips to the bone,” “Draw long red lines, scratching nails on Violist’s leg,” etc. (Figure 1).

Such scrupulous detail is intrinsic to *Rouge*’s realization, albeit not purely on account of technical precision. For Alenius, the score—like any score proving physically and mentally arduous for a performer—functions as a binding *contract* between herself and prospective performers. As she expresses:

If I don’t really know the people and they get the contract, and it says everything that I’m going to do, then they can choose to be a part of it. I can say, “play this, while I’m doing something to you, which you have already subscribed to,” and we’ll see how it goes. (Alenius 2017a)

Thus, in order for her performers to engage assiduously with the material, Alenius utilizes the score to clearly articulate the principal aspiration of *Rouge*, the infliction and endurance of bodily pain:

I will apply this “engagement” to their own bodies—it might be painful, but I want the music to be visible on their skin. At the same time this will test how strong their focus is, and how much I can do to them, while they are still staying in the music. (Alenius 2017b)

The impetus for *Rouge*’s keen emphasis on physical trauma initially arose from two elements, the first of which is the composer’s idiosyncratic fixation upon pain. Pain occupies an enduring presence within Alenius’ life, as she reports a heightened sensitivity for even the most minuscule of aches stemming from the act of composing, habitually observing residual discomfort in her arms and back.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Alenius acknowledges attaining pleasure from these sensations, divulging that:

I like pain. I like strong pain on muscles and skin. . . . You don’t know this as a child, because you’re just told that it hurts, but when you grow up, you realize “I know it hurts, I know what it means when it hurts, but I like it.” (2017a)

This receptivity to pain not only conditions Alenius’ fundamental relationship with her body, but also her being to the surrounding world: “It feels good to feel something. . . It feels good to feel connected to the body. It’s a strong connection to the body, this pain. I feel very alive” (*Ibid.*). Consequently, through the contract of the score, *Rouge* invites the performers to momentarily “enter her world” to endure, and even embrace, somatic pain; indeed, Alenius (2018a) relates that cellist Öhman, initially wary of such harsh infliction, subsequently derived fervent gratification from the recurrent exposure to the composer’s torment.

Intertwined with this invitation into Alenius’ experience, to in some sense inhabit her skin, is an impulse to deepen performers’ engagement, to “wake them up” and “have them be as into it as I am” (Alenius 2017a), with Alenius expressing: “I almost ‘fall in love’ with the people I work with, but I also hate them in a way, because I have such high expectations, and no one can live up to them” (2017b). Despite her (self-perceived) fastidious nature, Alenius does not wish to deprecate or to malign her performers during *Rouge*. Rather, she encroaches upon their individual boundaries to propel them beyond the traditional conceptions and limitations of their discipline, so she and they can collectively obtain an unusually intense engagement within a performance: “Where will my limit meet their limit? Will the music breakdown before, or will we meet at some point” (2017a).

Ultimately, for such vitality to transpire, Alenius maintains that the effort must be rooted in a mutual commitment to trust: “I want to both connect in the music and humanly... I think it’s about trust; it’s about creating a safe space... You need to feel each other. To me, it cannot only be through the art, it has to be a holistic project also” (2017a). This peculiar “holistic project” is one component of a more encompassing inquiry into recent developments of contemporary musical performance within the Nordic region.

### The Composer as Performer

*Rouge* was commissioned by Sanne Krogh Groth, associate professor of musicology at Lund University and former editor-in-chief of the Danish online contemporary music journal *Seismograf*, as part of her investigation into the fluctuating role of composers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Groth’s work examines composers who engage in the performance of their own work, “not as professional musicians but involving themselves in other ways” (Groth 2016, 686). She asks “how such performances can be perceived and received by their audiences, how they work within the institutions, and how they relate to larger historical contexts” (*Ibid.*, 694). This research led to a performance-centered seminar, “The Creator on Stage: The Death and Resurrection of the Composer in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Contemporary Music Performances,” at The Royal Danish Library in Copenhagen on September 15<sup>th</sup> 2016. Shortly after (September 30<sup>th</sup>), it was reconfigured as “The Composer as Performer,” a performance panel at Nordic Music Days, the oldest continuous new music collaboration between the Nordic nations, at Harpa Concert Hall and Conference Center in Reykjavik.

Sponsored by the Nordic Arts Council, Groth possessed significant freedom in organizing and curating both symposiums; and with ample financial assistance from the Danish State, she commissioned three new compositions from three Danish composers. The parameters Groth established for these works were specific: the compositions, each approximately twelve minutes in duration, must elicit substantial though non-traditional performative involvement from their composers. Besides Alenius, Groth commissioned works from Juliana Hodkinson and Kristian Hverring (though due to Hodkinson’s inability to attend the panel discussion at Harpa, Alenius and Hverring were joined by a similarly DIY-minded composer, Simon Steen-Andersen). Groth recruited Alenius for this investigation after witnessing her performance at the 2015 Nordic Music Days festival in Copenhagen, in which Alenius sang alongside a dying character (an arresting moment from Alenius’ 2015 dramatic work *When Silence Came*, a harrowing account of familial incest). Groth was enamored by Alenius’ musical style, which deviates considerably from many contemporary com-

posers in the Danish new music community; in particular, Groth (2018) notes Alenius' "quite unique and brave" insistence on lyricism and tonality, in spite of the intrepid and uncompromising explorations of controversial subject matter.

Groth (2016) published her research in *Contemporary Music Review*, with an article titled "Composers on Stage: Ambiguous Authorship in Contemporary Music Performance." In this text, Groth engages with the writings of 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century scholars from multiple disciplines (historical musicology, theater and performance studies, literary criticism) to assess and illuminate this contemporary trend, a phenomenon bearing historical precedence within the western classical tradition yet also deeply rooted within avant-garde practices that endeavored to upend the stylistic and performative restrictions of Western Art Music. Groth dissects this dichotomy by analyzing the role of the composer within it. According to Groth, much contemporary music is informed by the post-structuralist notion (such as that formulated by Roland Barthes) that a work's inherent meaning is not established by the artist's intention, but constructed through the viewer's perspective. Yet, the contemporary composer also inhabits a culture frequently acknowledging and celebrating the composer as the singular author of a composition, an idea effectively rooted in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romanticism. While this dichotomy situates contemporary composers and audiences, this is mediated when the composer embodies the role of a performer (but not primarily a musician) within experimental interdisciplinary settings:

This appearance . . . contains a "doubleness" in which both representation and presentation are present: The institutional context strongly represents conventions of western art music; meanwhile, a type of performance and live art aesthetics are presented at the same time, stressing the presence of the artist with the intention to avoid semiotic communication with the audience. (Groth 2016, 687)

According to Groth (2016, 687), "this tension, the simultaneous appearance of two conventions and traditions, perhaps even to be considered paradigms, in the one and same performer" initiates an ambivalence; these compositions "reveal the processes of musical performance in ways that undermine the Romantic idea of the composer while concurrently celebrating that very same idea through their exposition and staging of the composer" (*Ibid.*, 686), a dichotomy which Groth argues permeates throughout her chosen composers' oeuvres.

This approach also constitutes an exploration of music *as performance*, an embodied act that is more than the aural reproduction of a score, an in-

clination distilled into a compositional manifesto by the impetus for Groth's investigation, Irish composer and vocalist Jennifer Walshe.<sup>2</sup> Presented in March 2016 at Borealis Festival in Bergen, "The New Discipline" is the term utilized by Walshe to articulate the manner of labor in which particular composers, regardless of disparity of interest or aesthetic, share a concern for the physical, theatrical, visual, and musical elements of a work, and how they are interrelated with the bodies on stage. According to Walshe, "The New Discipline" does not advocate for a new style or subgenre of musical performance, but rather accentuates the interdisciplinarity inherent within these composers' methods, as they cultivate influence from dance, theater, video, visual art, installations, literature, stand-up comedy, and social media. Walshe's approach entails the means by which composers develop new compositional and performative techniques to resolve challenges emerging from such plurality:

How to locate a psychological/physiological node which produces a very specific sound; how to notate tiny head movements alongside complex bow manoeuvres; how to train your body so that you can run 10 circuits of the performance space before the piece begins; . . . how to dissolve the concept of a single author and work collectively; how to dissolve the normal concept of what a composition is. (Walshe 2016)

This dissolution is vital, as the methods Walshe outlines freely subsume a plethora of both technological and aesthetic approaches. Walshe acknowledges the relation with 20<sup>th</sup>-century precedents such as Dada, Fluxus, and the music-theatre of Mauricio Kagel,<sup>3</sup> yet sees "The New Discipline" not as a regurgitation, but an extension cognizant of the innumerable artistic, cultural, and social progressions that have transpired in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Despite her emphasis on interdisciplinarity, Walshe ultimately regards this work as *music*, and concludes that musical performance is an *embodied* act where physicality and aurality simultaneously arise from the same locus of creative expression:

[T]hese modes of thinking about the world, these compositional techniques—they are not "music theatre," they *are* music. Or from a different perspective, maybe what is at stake is the idea that all music is music theatre. Perhaps we are finally willing to accept that the bodies playing the music are part of the music, that they're present, they're valid and they inform our listening whether subconsciously or consciously. That it's not too late for us to have bodies. (Walshe 2016)

As evidenced by the extreme encounter of *Rouge*, Alenius undoubtedly shares an affinity with the interdisciplinarity articulated by Walshe and manifested within the works of her colleagues in Groth's investigation.

Moreover, as indicated by the stage directions incorporated into *Rouge*'s score, the meticulous consideration of corporeality (even within *Rouge*'s vehement display of torment) is imperative for Alenius, for the performers' bodily actions are as integral to the performative conception and realization of *Rouge* as the sounds these actions give rise to. Likewise, Alenius' own performative involvement, required by Groth's commission, is a key feature of several of her works, echoing the sentiments by Walshe and other composers working in the vein described by the New Discipline. This commitment is not ego-driven, but rather based on practicality, for the composer's direct involvement in a demanding interdisciplinary work can often be the most cost-effective and time-efficient solution.

Yet, despite these similarities, Alenius deems her oeuvre a peripheral development due to a self-perceived disconnection with Walshe and the other Composer-Performer artists examined within Groth's inquiry. Alenius ultimately does not relate aesthetically to their modalities of performance, and maintains that comprehension of her "holistic project" would not benefit from, or may even be hindered by, associations with a distinct manifesto or artistic movement. As she herself states:

I generally don't care a lot about being part of an environment, just as I don't care for fan culture. I think it means that people forget the essence. It's not about the artists—it's about the art. (quoted in Grønberg 2018)

Context can predetermine interpretations of a performance, and for Alenius, the audience member should be "blank," devoid of as many ideological preconceptions as possible until the performance is experienced.

Alenius' conception of musical performance as a holistic endeavor stems from her distinctive extra-musical background. Though passionate for music and theater since her youth, Alenius briefly studied anthropology and ethnology while attending a music academy in France, particularly enthralled with phenomenological inquiries into human consciousness and interrelationality. Despite Alenius' aversion towards classification under "The New Discipline," these elements undeniably resonate with Walshe's manifesto and, though interwoven within the compositional fabric of *Rouge*, radically manifested within *Rouge*'s predecessor, a series of secretive, intimate compositions entitled *Porøset*. Engaging *Porøset* with phenomenological models for human intersubjectivity formulated by Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Merleau-Ponty will illuminate the synergistic dynamic between performer and audience, and Alenius' ultimate aspiration for these esoteric encounters.

“The ruins . . . through which I roam.”

*Porøset*, a series of distinct works with Alenius as the sole recurring participant, commenced in 2014 in collaboration with the Royal Danish Theater in Copenhagen. The title “*Porøset*” is a term invented by Alenius, derived from the French word “poreuse” (“porous” in English), meant to evoke the decaying state of aging wood, the moment in which “wood gets very old and very dry, and it crumbles when you touch it. . . . [*Porøset*] is something that will fall apart when you touch it, something very fragile” (Alenius 2017a). The ephemerality suggested by the title alone reflects Alenius’ desire to produce an oeuvre nurturing sensations of stark intimacy and vulnerability between its audience and performers. Though each *Porøset* possesses a distinctive thematic premise and artistic identity, each iteration (titled *Porøset I*, *Porøset II*, etc.) does retain definitive structural components essential to the work’s ultimate realization. The duration of each performance of *Porøset* is approximately fifteen minutes, an exceptionally brief work compared to the large-scale opera and ballet productions usually staged within the Royal Danish Theater. Additionally, every iteration of *Porøset* is mounted within a concealed location inside the theater, information that is deliberately withheld from the audience prior to its commencement. Yet, the most distinguishing attribute of *Porøset* is not only where it is performed, but for whom: each performance of *Porøset* is presented for only a single audience member at a time, their seating designated by a lone blue-green upholstered chair, a slender white “1” sewn conspicuously into its cushioned back (Figure 2).

Alenius’ idiosyncratic and radically minimal conception of *Porøset* is the result of an impetus to transcend the artistic frustrations she encountered whilst immersed in large-scale ballet productions at the Royal Danish Theater. Specifically, Alenius was considerably dissatisfied with the audience’s function within these performative situations:

I think they’re too comfortable. I think they’re too lazy, I think they know too much about the piece beforehand. . . . Even if they want to, they can’t be open-minded, because they are simply guided too much before they can experience the piece. (Alenius 2017a)

These (blunt) criticisms of the audience’s role within traditional musical-theatrical settings is accompanied by the composer’s detestation of, in her mind, the unnecessarily lengthy durations exploited by works to justify proper theatrical productions, often at the expense of a work’s thematic and narrative development. Furthermore, Alenius grew weary of the extensive gaps which frequently occurred between the processes of composition and



Figure 2. “1” Blue-Green Chair, on set of *Porøset V*. Photo by Alastair Wiper.

production, oftentimes “being driven mad” by the inability to experience a completed work until a year later. Unable to reconcile these vexations within conventional ballet productions, Alenius sought to address her grievances by establishing a new format of performance: works, concise in duration and extremely minimal in production value, which solicit the audience’s engagement through unanticipated degrees of secrecy and solitude: “For *Porøset*, it’s about experiencing things that you don’t know before you are in it, and where you are alone . . . so you must interpret it on your own” (Alenius 2017a).

Another distinct characteristic of *Porøset* is Alenius’ choice of venue within the Royal Danish Theater: the Old Stage, the original structure of the theatre constructed in 1874. The decision to mount *Porøset* within a “grand old institution” was fundamental to Alenius’ initial conception and realization of these works. She opposed the notion of programming *Porøset* within an encompassing “contemporary” or “avant-garde” festival, noting that the probable audience enticed by such work “would have expectations of being shocked or getting something very edgy, which is something I don’t try to do. I don’t want to be violent, I don’t try to shock people. I try to give people a present, . . . a present they don’t expect” (2017a).

With *Porøset*, Alenius does not wish to align herself with contemporary performers, oftentimes perceiving them as overtly “aggressive,” “eager to shock,” and “political,” the antithesis to her conception of *Porøset*. To Alenius, mounting *Porøset* within the concealed corridors and decrepit attic spaces of the Old Stage, a preeminent landmark of Danish cultural



**Figure 3.** Louise Alenius (left) and Marie Louise Tüxen (right) performing *Porøset IV*.

heritage, renders *Porøset* not just an intervention in the social positions of the performer, composer, and audience, but also an intervention in the conventional social spaces they inhabit, and ultimately expands the pieces' scope of reception to "an audience which could be anybody. . . . A lot of people came because they knew I made ballet music; they thought they were going to see a ballet. They had no idea they were going to be alone" (Alenius 2017a).<sup>4</sup>

In terms of conception and execution, each iteration of *Porøset* is eminently site-specific. Alenius either envisions a work upon discovering a distinct location within the Old Stage, or permits an abstract mood to arbitrate and curate a space for the eventual performance. The impetus for *Porøset IV* arose coincidentally, as Alenius stumbled upon an attic space overladen with fragile wicker baskets and furniture. Enamored by the attic's dilapidated contents, Alenius conceived of *Porøset IV* instantaneously, envisioning a nude woman sitting idly in a wicker chair. With the weathered baskets and furniture proving as integral to *Porøset IV* as the performers themselves, little of the space was altered for the performances, a testament to Alenius' minimalistic approach to *Porøset's* production: "if your idea is good enough, then you can do it with very little" (Alenius 2017a).

During a performance of *Porøset IV*, an usher escorts the audience member to the attic space. Instructed to sit in *Porøset's* characteristic blue-green chair, the audience member encounters two performers situated in front of them. As depicted in Figure 3, positioned stage left is Alenius, clothed in a charcoal black jumpsuit, sensuously singing in a distinctively airy, nasal voice. Kneeling down inspecting a taxidermied crow perched upon a branch, Alenius utilizes a pair of tweezers to flatten the ruffled feathers, disentangle the bird's talons, and remove extraneous filth from

its perch. Seated stage right is a nude woman in a wicker arm chair, her catatonic eyes gazing outwards, ostensibly incognizant of her surroundings. To the audience member, she exudes the solemn, lifeless qualities of a costume mannequin. Encircling them are disheveled stacks of wicker baskets and chairs, all accentuated underneath the dim radiance of two antiquated floor lamps.

Upon returning the tweezers to a basket by her feet, Alenius grasps a bottle of yellow oil. Placing one drop upon each of the woman's knees, she leisurely spreads the oil across the woman's skin, caressing her knees, thighs, and legs. Retrieving a razor blade from a basket, Alenius carefully draws it across the woman's oiled thigh, before proceeding upwards around her breast, arm, and shoulder. As with the taxidermied bird, Alenius is employing the blade to excise any "imperfections" from the woman's body. Softly tucking the woman's hair behind her shoulders, Alenius ceases her involvement. The piece concludes with the nude woman inhabiting a physically rejuvenated and immaculate state, mirroring the freshly pruned crow resting upon its perch. This inference is reinforced by the presence of a disembodied male narration, chronicling the life of a woman who, after a bitter divorce, receives an opportunity for a life anew.

As with many incarnations of *Porøset*, *Porøset IV* was realized in collaboration with close colleagues of Alenius. The male narration was supplied by Kim Bildsøe Lassen, a well-known television presenter and journalist whose distinct and authoritative voice, familiar to Danish audience members, was rendered achingly elusive within this performative context. The seated woman, Marie Louise Tüxen, is a Danish author chosen by the composer for her stereotypical Nordic physique; Alenius (2018b) considered her "the prototype of a Danish woman in 2016." Prior to *Porøset IV*'s conception, Tüxen experienced personal frustrations similar to those detailed by Lassen's narration, thus inspiring *Porøset IV*'s thematic premise. With her "prototypical" Nordic appearance presented in a detached, exhibition-like manner, Alenius frames Tüxen's body as a broad metaphorical representation of women in Denmark, and the possibility of triumph over trauma.

### *Porøset II*

Whereas *Porøset IV* is an example of Alenius permitting a physical space to enthrall and dictate her compositional process, *Porøset II* entails an engagement in the disaggregation of a particular space's distinctive material culture in order to curate an experience which explicitly and graphically confronts the audience, thrusting them without prior knowledge (or consent) into an intimately harrowing encounter. *Porøset II* was developed in

collaboration with Danish cinematographer Klaus Birkenfeldt. Prior to the work's conception in 2014, Birkenfeldt was dying of terminal cancer. Residing with a friend due to his dissolving medical and financial situation, Birkenfeldt, wishing not to burden others with his impending demise, was deeply concerned with discovering the most suitable place in which to die. Initially apprehensive, yet imbued with an insatiable desire to grant him solace, Alenius devised a manner in which to gift Birkenfeldt the dignified "death" he desired: she proposed curating a space within the Old Stage in which Birkenfeldt, wishing to be candidly exposed and witnessed in his deteriorating physical condition, could "die" peacefully.

Prior to a performance, an usher escorts the audience member to the tailor room. Navigating the hallways and corridors of the Old Stage, through a set of headphones they hear an unidentified man's voice chronicling his failing health and the daughter he will abandon. This audio was compiled from a six-hour interview Alenius conducted with Birkenfeldt beforehand, though not structured linearly; Alenius classified this as a type of "poem," a fractured narrative whose precise context and implications remained elusive to the listener prior to entering the performance space. Upon arrival at the tailor room, the audience member is seated in the blue-green chair, positioned alongside a hospital bed in which Birkenfeldt is lying unresponsive, ostensibly asleep. For several minutes, they sit beside Birkenfeldt, alone and in silence.<sup>5</sup> With all of *Porøset*, and especially this second work, an instant of jarring disruption often occurs for the audience member upon entering the performance space. For the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, this disruption is fundamental in establishing an ethical relationship with another being. It is a universal quality of the Other, one which enables the Self to discover they are in "possession of a world I can bestow as a gift upon the Other—that is, as a presence before a face" (Levinas 1969, 50). Levinas denotes this encounter, which transpires not abstractly but between two corporeal beings, as the "face to face":

The proximity of the other is the face's meaning . . . that goes beyond those plastic forms which forever try to cover the face. . . . But always the face shows through these forms. Prior to any particular expression and beneath all particular expressions . . . there is the nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say extreme exposure, defenselessness, vulnerability itself. (Levinas 1989, 82–83)

Within the face of the Other, beneath all exterior expression, lies an impending finitude, a mortality inexplicably recognizable which constitutes fathomless vulnerability, a frailty so raw that the totalizing ego of the Self is disrupted, destabilized, and dissolved into an emergent intersubjectivity.

Through this defamiliarizing encounter, the Self relinquishes their self-assured grasp upon their conscious existence, and surrenders themselves irrevocably to the beckoning cry of the Other. This solemn bond between Self and Other materializes from the Self's recognition of the Other's perpetual alterity, a particularity immune to the ego's reductive infringements, an otherness "whose bounds do not cease to extend" (Levinas 1998, xiv). In Levinasian terms, to behold the face of the Other—an irreducible exteriority which cannot be totalized, appropriated, or possessed—is to glimpse a horizonless trace of *infinity*: "The infinite in the finite, the more in the less . . . is produced as Desire—not a Desire that the possession of the Desirable slakes, but the Desire for the Infinite which the desirable arouses rather than satisfies. A Desire perfectly disinterested—goodness" (Levinas 1969, 50).

This "goodness" articulated by Levinas ultimately establishes the ethical foundation of the Self's bond with the Other inherent within this vision of the infinite. Amidst the recognition of the Other's boundless and ungraspable vulnerability, the Self responds to this suffering through an overwhelming sense of responsibility for the Other, an ethical duty transforming egotistical tendencies of possession and reduction into generosity and decency. Pain, loneliness, abandonment, death—these constitute the corporeality binding the Self to the Other. To selflessly receive the Other's infinite suffering is to render the Self *infinitely* responsible, "incapable of approaching the Other with empty hands" (*Ibid.*, 50). Levinas designates this ethical metaphysics as the "*first philosophy*" (1989, 76), a pre-ontological occurrence unknowable by the ego, from which the entirety of ethical human interaction arises. By collaborating with Birkenfeldt and bluntly exposing his deteriorating physical state, Alenius is, to evoke Levinasian language, calling the audience member into question by interrupting their perceived notions of reality through confounding exposure to another's suffering. Through Birkenfeldt's vulnerability, the audience member recognizes their transience, and are confronted with their own inevitable dissolution: "Beyond the visibility of whatever is unveiled, and prior to any knowledge about death, mortality lies in the Other" (*Ibid.*, 83).

To further intensify this interpersonal disruption, Alenius sought to accentuate such impermanence by contrasting Birkenfeldt's failing body with a meticulously curated space of exceeding dissimilarity. She struggled immensely with locating the proper space in which to frame Birkenfeldt's "death," before settling upon an unexpected area within the Old Stage (Figure 4):

I ended up in the tailor's room, where they have all the ballet dresses. I decided to make a space in the middle, . . . one spotlight on a hospital bed



Figure 4. Klaus Birkenfeldt on the set of *Porøset II*. Photo by Klaus Birkenfeldt.

and the chair . . . above it; I made a big cloud of tutu skirts. . . . It was very simple, yet that was the idea. I wanted to put people in a beautiful space, and present something really nasty. (Alenius 2017a)

In this space, the audience member experiences a Levinasian disruption as they are situated, without forewarning, within mere inches of Birkenfeldt and the devastating state of his pale, emaciated, deteriorating form. Birkenfeldt, the “rupture of death embodied” (Levinas 1969, 58–59), is starkly juxtaposed with sleek white mannequin forms and a billowing mass of tutu skirts nestled in the rafters above, epitomizing the emergence of material creation imbued with the interminable possibilities of life. Gazing upon Birkenfeldt, the audience member, engulfed in disbelief or despair, surrenders their existential certitude as they witness the unappeasable insistence of death, a force which inexorably demands from all “an obedience where there is no desertion” (Levinas 1998, 52). Subsequently, unbeknownst to the audience member, Alenius discreetly enters the space and briefly sings lyric-less music (“as no words can describe this situation” [Alenius 2018a]), after which they remain in silence together, until the performance’s conclusion.

Like all incarnations of *Porøset*, *Porøset II* possesses the potential to fulfill the Levinasian infinite, and arguably embodies Levinas’ phenomenology of ethics more substantially than traditional artistic performance or quotidian modalities of existence, due to the exceptional parameters which Alenius has constructed. *Porøset* enacts a performative *intervention* in the rigid social norms which constitute human life, whether they be the complex triangulation of the composer-performer-audience dynamic within

Western Art Music, or the conventionally bounded positions one inhabits within diurnal social interaction. Whether these orientations themselves are inherently prohibitive or even unethical in nature, the interruption of these positions, through the ineluctable intimacy and vulnerability of *Porøset*, compels the audience member to encounter the boundless alterity of the Other with a diminished possibility of egotistical reduction or ignorance, an occurrence relatively external to *Porøset's* distinct performative context. As previously elaborated, this disruption is further accentuated by Alenius' subtle reconceptualizations of material, cultural and social space, the milieu in which the innumerable modes of human experience, whether ethical or unethical, transpire. In the case of *Porøset II*, the parameters established by Alenius force the audience member to confront the threshold of life's eternal cessation, an intangible permanence deliberately buried beneath the mundanities of daily life, enabling the cognizant avoidance of others' suffering and one's own mortality.

Yet, Alenius' conception of *Porøset* not only embodies Levinas' ethical metaphysics but also *transcends* it, as the ethical interrelationality formulated by Levinas, though by no means a nihilistic conception of suffering, is nevertheless problematic once engaged with the broader intersubjectivity of *Porøset*. Throughout the numerous performances of *Porøset II* (which, according to Alenius, occurred forty to forty-five times), she and Birkenfeldt cultivated an astonishingly powerful connection between one another, and even more so with the audience members, with Alenius noting "when they get touched, we get touched as well" (2017a). Somewhat paradoxically, although *Porøset* always begins by concealing information from the audience, Birkenfeldt expressed that a profound sense of *trust* emerged between himself, Alenius, and the audience members unknowingly thrust into an inconceivable and impossible situation. Indeed, for Alenius, trust arose as the defining conviction behind *Porøset*, and established the foundation for all successive iterations.<sup>6</sup> When considered alongside Levinas' ethical metaphysics, this notion of trust (though emanating from the interpersonal disruption articulated by Levinas, and periodically fulfilling the Levinasian responsibility towards the Other) is ultimately an interrelationality encompassing elements beyond the scope of Levinasian ethics.

According to Levinas, the face of the Other incessantly precipitates an event of transcendence, as the Self is confoundingly exposed to the Other's mortality, an ungraspable ephemerality that is perpetually infinite, and thus, *transcendent*. Because the Self cannot possess what is transcendent, the ethical injunction of the face is ultimately *unilateral*, and responsibility for the Other's suffering is placed *upon* the Self, as opposed to the Self

freely enacting a responsible duty. The Self is summoned by the Other to recognize the ethical demand for responsibility inherent within the Other's vulnerability, and the degree to which the Self enacts the responsibility accorded to them determines their ethicality as a human being. This radical conception of human interrelationality hinges on Levinas' deduction that ethics is pre-ontological, a Good beyond Being; responsibility is not generated by the Self but rather *bestowed* upon one by the infinite transcendent face of the Other. Thus, with ethics emanating outside of Being (and the natural world in which all beings inhabit), Levinas designates ethics as strictly a *pre-human relationality*, functioning as a radical intervention or disruption of one's existence, which establishes a unilateral intersubjectivity that ultimately fails to recognize and engage with the *indeterminacy* inherent within all human interaction.

Levinas' immutable definition of human intersubjectivity cannot encapsulate Alenius' notion of trust, an emergent interrelationality not of pre-ontological origin, but cultivated and nurtured between two embodied beings.<sup>7</sup> The innumerable physiological, psychological, and societal factors which mold an individual's corporeality can never be fully ascertained by another being, and thus remain obscured and opaque. But, through the vulnerability of *Porøset*, the audience member and performers alike possess the opportunity to expose their enigmatic depths through a *bilateral* construction of trust, a delicate bond fashioned through the fragile interweaving of their somatic experiences. As Alenius (2017a) later states, "I think that almost everything grows out of trust in one form or another. It is a basic premise that we can create a good dialogue and believe that we want the best for each other." This formulation of human trust is fundamentally inseparable from the worldly environment, and thus subject to innumerable contextual conditions. This notion, neglected by Levinasian ethics, is embraced by Alenius, as evidenced by her ability to encapsulate the harrowing nature of Birkenfeldt's failing body through its juxtaposition to the adjacent space. Yet, only in the aftermath of this "perfect death scenario" (Alenius 2017a) did she wholly comprehend the implications and ramifications of performing alongside Birkenfeldt:

Then it was over, and then he went back to the hospital, and I had to tell the people at the theatre "Okay, take this hospital bed, it came from that stockroom." . . . I had a few hours where I was just like, "What the fuck? . . . Why did we do that? What the fuck was this about?" That's when I realized, that's how I work. I just don't know what [the piece] is until it's over . . . and suddenly I was there, and it was over, and I totally broke down. I was so sad; I was so, so sad. . . . I think it might have been some kind of a long goodbye: "Let's say goodbye forty-five times." But then, he was still alive. He was still there. (Alenius 2017a)

## *Prequiem*

Two weeks following *Porøset II*, Birkenfeldt succumbed to cancer. Devastated by his passing, Alenius determined that the holistic endeavor she commenced alongside Birkenfeldt, the cultivation of trust that emerged from the unbearable intimacy of *Porøset II*, was left abandoned and unfinished. Subsequently, *Porøset II* materialized as the catalyst for Alenius' 2016 piece, *Prequiem*. Performed in collaboration with the 2016 Copenhagen Opera Festival which encouraged musical performance within unconventional locales throughout Copenhagen, *Prequiem* (meaning "Pre-Requiem, or requiem for the living" [Alenius 2017a]), was performed at the Diakoniss Foundation's Hospice for a single terminal patient (and any present relatives) at a time. Though the conceptual premise of *Prequiem* resembles that of *Porøset*, one crucial distinction lies within Alenius' performative role. As opposed to meticulously devising a set of succinct stipulations conditioning a performative situation unknown to the audience member, Alenius contacts the patients directly for permission to perform. It is not the audience member encountering the composer's furtively devised parameters, but rather Alenius who is entering *their* space, and thus reduced to a more vulnerable state. According to Alenius (2017a), "the *Prequiem* was really about getting me in there. And my way to get in there, and to sit with people, and to do something for them, is to call it Art. And I didn't really care if it turned out to be Art. . . . I wanted to get in there, and build up that trust."

With each performance lasting approximately twenty minutes, Alenius, accompanied by violist Jenni Luning, enters a hospice room, sits beside the patient, and gently sings lyrics of memory, death, and confession. Nestled within Alenius' hands is an Indian *shruti box*, a bellows-driven instrument possessing a timbre akin to that of a harmonium, producing chord-based drones. A woven scarf extends between Alenius and the patient, a ritualistic gesture signifying the intertwining of their experiences, and from that, a mutual cultivation of trust. With one patient dying just hours following Alenius' performance with them, *Prequiem* entails an intimacy even more harrowing than *Porøset II*, and like *Porøset* effectively dissolves the traditional boundaries between performance and reality. For Alenius, *Prequiem* and *Porøset* not only engender a manner in which others nurture trustworthiness, but also provokes an opportunity to witness others' inner emotions manifested externally, and for her to recognize her own enigmata distilled and reflected through the exterior expressions of others. This sentiment articulated by Alenius presents a facet of embodied perception imbued with a seemingly paradoxical reflexivity, an experiential phenomenon poetically formulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968, 11) as *écart*:

“Somewhere behind those eyes, behind those gestures, . . . coming from I know not [where], another private world shows through, through the fabric of my own, and for a moment I live in it.”

*Écart*, a term which defies exact translation (Hass 2008, 129), functions not only as a philosophical construct but also an expressive device utilized by Merleau-Ponty to designate the subtleties inherent within intersubjective experience, and embodied relationalities to the encompassing world. With *écart*, elusive yet ontologically essential, Merleau-Ponty ventures to disavow the notion that differences between Self and Other must categorize them in strict opposition, or that the Other is purely transcendent towards the Self (a distinction denoted by Levinas). Merleau-Ponty forgoes both opposition and transcendence, instead invoking *separation* as the key dissimilarity between human beings, a non-dualistic divergence permitting myriad relationalities besides opposition. To Merleau-Ponty, only by recognizing this separation can the Self perceive the Other’s existence, or even identify themselves as a “Self”. Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, *écart* is the “separation-difference” which enables embodied perception to occur:

My body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is a perceived), and moreover . . . this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world *reflects* it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world; . . . they are in a relation of transgression or of overlapping—This also means: my body is not only one perceived among others, it is the measurant . . . of all the dimensions of the world. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 248)

Merleau-Ponty stresses that *écart* does not emanate prior to or outside of Being (as with Levinas’ conception of ethics), but rather from *within* it, functioning as a perceptual “overture” into the world, an opening through which all corporeal beings and environments are encountered: “With the first vision, the first contact, the first pleasure, there is initiation; . . . the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 151). Within this situatedness, *écart* initiates a reflexivity in human perception which entails a specific model for interrelationality, signified by Merleau-Ponty’s utilization of the word “overlapping.” In this context, “overlapping” articulates interrelationalities shaped through the perpetual intertwining or encroachment of beings who are separate, but not primarily in opposition. It is this cohesion of divergences that constitutes Merleau-Ponty’s idea of “reversibility,” the reflexivity in which the Self not only acknowledges the existence of Others, but also recognizes their own existence *through* the perspectives of Others, and vice-versa.

With these subtly interlinked concepts of *écart* and “reversibility,” Merleau-Ponty confounds the notions of relationality and identity as formulated through opposition. Beings are not dichotomized as “Self and Other,” but rather differentiated as “Self and *Another*,” beings who are irreducibly dissimilar, yet engaged in synergistic interrelationalities with themselves and the encompassing world. Merleau-Ponty denotes this realm as “the flesh,” a provocative expression accentuating, amongst many elements, the chiasmic, sensual carnality of human experience, “the mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its spontaneous activity” (Abram 1996, 66).

Alenius’ cultivation of trust, the holistic hallmark of *Porøset* and *Prequiem*, is emblematic of Merleau-Ponty’s conception of *écart*. Embodied beings and their surrounding environments are symbiotically involved, and the sedimented constructs of thought and language inhabiting all beings “surge up amid the world” (Hass 2008, 196), manifesting in new relationalities and paradigms which illuminate and transform that world, incessantly intertwined in a synergistic cycle of Becoming. To Merleau-Ponty, no hierarchy divides thought from somatic experience; these abstractions “are not islets, isolated fragments of being; all this . . . is *of being*” (1968, 63). Therefore, the formulation of embodied intersubjectivity, the intricate interweaving of beings, ideas, and paradigms, is a generative process defined by contingency and, ultimately, *creativity*. *Porøset* and *Prequiem* function as intimate ceremonies, ritualistic interventions proffering the creative possibility of trust between autonomous beings. A dimmed stage in Harpa, the antiquated spaces of the Old Stage, a lone hospice bed—all are of “the flesh,” framed within and amidst the perennial envelopment of beings perpetually inscribed in the world. For me, this facet of Alenius’ diverse oeuvre, and her rationale for continuing this holistic venture, is best encapsulated by her own remarks on *Prequiem*:

I don’t know if I could call that a piece of Art; . . . it was more like a meeting. A meeting of nothing, because we had nothing in common. They would disappear, I would go back to life, and we would never meet again. But we met in a crazy situation, and we sat there for twenty minutes together, and that’s pretty life-assuring; . . . it’s a good thing. It’s one of the best things that can happen. (Alenius 2017a)

### Notes

1. Though I have inquired about this in my interviews (Alenius 2017a, 2018a, 2018b), Alenius has never disclosed any medical condition that would contribute to this acute awareness of physical pain, mentioning only that she has always felt this way.
2. Examining music as an embodied performative act is also a current research interest of several scholars in the US and UK, including Philip Auslander, Eric Clarke, Nicolas Cook, and Daniel Leech-Wilkinson. Groth herself engages extensively with both Auslander and Cook within her essay.
3. Traditional music scholarship may trace this all-encompassing perspective of an artwork back to Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.
4. The only advertising I have seen related to *Porøset* was a small, nondescript white poster placed on a stand in the Old Stage lobby, with a black and white photograph of Alenius and the word *Porøset* in a cursive font framing part of the image. Aside from the name of the composer and of the piece, it gave no specific details as to what the performance would entail.
5. With respect to the audience members' response to *Porøset II*, I have been unable to contact anyone who experienced this piece, and Alenius has had no further contact with them either.
6. With trust emerging as the key concept behind *Porøset*, one could interpret Alenius' conception of *Porøset* (and the various parameters in which she constructs) as a *breach* of trust, which makes this emergence of trust seem puzzling or even contradictory as a central concept. Yet, it is arguable that a large percentage of performance-based or other intermedial art made during and after the 20<sup>th</sup> century could be seen as "deceiving" or misleading the viewer by disrupting, challenging, or outright ignoring the traditional "framings" of public musical and artistic events. As noted earlier, Alenius conceals information from the audience not purely for deception's sake, but as a means to allow them a less-filtered experience of the piece.
7. All of the writing in regard to Levinas and *Porøset II* is entirely my own work. I met with Alenius in Copenhagen in July 2018, and we discussed this portion of the essay. She was familiar with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty (wholly agreeing with the inclusion of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy within this essay), but had never encountered Levinas before. Alenius responded very enthusiastically, and felt engaging with Levinas' concepts illuminated much of what she was exploring experientially, especially with *Porøset II*.

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