ACT zeitschrift für musik & performance

Elena Mendoza and Matthias Rebstock's *La ciudad de las mentiras*: Fiction as polyphony

(Carmen Noheda)

Elena Mendoza and Matthias Rebstock's *La ciudad de las mentiras*: Fiction as polyphony

Abstract

This study discusses the creative process of *La ciudad de las mentiras* (*City of Lies*), music theatre co-authored by the composer Elena Mendoza and the stage director Matthias Rebstock. In 2017, Gerard Mortier commissioned *City of Lies* as the first work of music theatre that the Teatro Real in Madrid would premiere in its 200-year history. From the differentiation between opera and music theatre, my research analyzes the *City of Lies*' narrative principles, which is based on four stories by the Uruguayan writer Juan Carlos Onetti (1909–1994). In particular, I focus on *La novia robada* (*The Stolen Bride*). This story leads me to a discussion about experimenting with narrative processes on the idea of polyphony. Based on this exploration, my proposal sheds light on the diversity of working methods and highlights aspects related to the production systems of opera houses that condition the authors' conception of music theatre. I aim to examine Mendoza and Rebstock's multidisciplinary collaboration and their artistic practices that affect co-presence and corporeality with two female instrumentalists in the main roles and an ensemble on the stage together with actors and singers leading both the dramatic and musical actions. This approach reflects on a precise set design that entails non-hierarchical performances and improvisation scenes. The theoretical framework that supports this analysis refers to the terminology for "Composed theatre" investigated by Matthias Rebstock and David Roesner. Therefore, I address both performative and creative processes and production conditions that challenge music theatre creation in the current context of the Teatro Real.

Zusammenfassung

Diese Studie befasst sich mit dem kreativen Prozess von *La ciudad de las mentiras* (*Stadt der Lügen*), ein Musiktheater, das von der Komponistin Elena Mendoza und dem Regisseur Matthias Rebstock kreiert wurde. *La ciudad de las mentiras* wurde 2017 im Auftrag von Gerard Mortier als erstes Musiktheaterwerk in der 200-jährigen Geschichte des Teatro Real in Madrid uraufgeführt. Ausgehend von der Unterscheidung zwischen Oper und Musiktheater betrachtet der Beitrag die Erzählprinzipien von *La ciudad de las mentiras*, die auf vier Geschichten des uruguayischen Schriftstellers Juan Carlos Onetti (1909-1994) basieren. Insbesondere liegt die Konzentration auf *La novia robada* (*Die gestohlene Braut*). Diese Erzählung führt zu einer Diskussion über das Experimentieren mit narrativen Prozessen, die auf der Idee der Polyphonie beruhen. Darauf aufbauend beleuchtet der Text die Vielfalt der Arbeitsmethoden sowie Aspekte von Produktionssystemen in Opernhäusern, die das Konzept von Musiktheater der zwei Autor*innen mitbestimmen. Betrachtet werden die multidisziplinäre Zusammenarbeit von Mendoza und Rebstock und ihre künstlerischen Praktiken, die sich auf die Ko-Präsenz und Körperlichkeit auswirken, wenn zwei Instrumentalistinnen in den Hauptrollen und ein Ensemble auf der Bühne zusammen mit Schauspielern und Sängern, die dramatischen und musikalischen Aktionen leiten. Dieser Ansatz spiegelt sich in einer präzisen Szenografie, die nicht-hierarchische Performances und Improvisationsszenen beinhaltet. Der theoretische Rahmen dieser Analyse bezieht sich auf das von Matthias Rebstock und David Roesner vorgeschlagene Konzept des „Composed Theatre". Daher werden sowohl performative als auch kreative Prozesse und Produktionsbedingungen angesprochen, die die Schaffung vom Musiktheater im aktuellen Kontext des Teatro Real herausfordern.

Elena Mendoza and Matthias Rebstock's *La ciudad de las mentiras*: Fiction as polyphony

Titus Engel made his debut at the Teatro Real in Madrid on the premiere of Pilar Jurado's *La página en blanco* (*The Blank Page*) in 2011. On that occasion, the conductor wrote an essay in the program notes entitled "A premiere for history."[1] Looking beyond the media impact of this expression, his text contrasted two approaches to composing a new opera: the prolongation of the operatic genre in accordance with its tradition and the radical questioning in experimental music theatre. However, Engel did not know then that this consideration would materialize a few years later by conducting Elena Mendoza and Matthias Rebstock's *La ciudad de las mentiras* (*City of Lies*) in 2017. In fact, Pilar Jurado became the first woman to premiere an opera at the Teatro Real and, although in *The Blank Page* Engel perceived an attempt to reconcile the two above-mentioned approaches, her opera made history from subjects that had eluded artistic practice itself: the normalization of women in the creation of performing arts. In the meantime, Mendoza and Rebstock's work could use the same headline as it was the first music theatre that the Teatro Real premiered in its 200-year history.

Considering its creative process, *City of Lies* favors the discussion that Engel announced by confronting opera to music theatre. Since its reopening in 1997, Teatro Real had exclusively produced opera, but *City of Lies* was proposed as music theatre: the project extended the musicians tasks, who were challenged both to become theatrical performers on stage in mixed ensembles and to contribute to the creation process. Coincidentally, Engel's idea articulated the program notes drafted by Mendoza and Rebstock, in which they pointed to the revision of the operatic genre with the title "Composing opera today."[2] Their text began as follows: "Today, composing an opera means to some extent reinventing it as a genre."[3] For the first time, *City of Lies* introduced the co-authorship of an artistic team to experiment with its members' creative possibilities up to the live

---

[1] Titus Engel, "Un estreno para la historia," in: *La página en blanco*, program booklet Madrid: Teatro Real, 2011, pp. 1–43, here p. 37.

[2] Ibid. , pp. 14–15.

[3] "Componer una ópera hoy en día significa hasta cierto punto reinventársela como género," translation by the author, in: Elena Mendoza and Matthias Rebstock, "Componer ópera hoy," in: *La ciudad de las mentiras*, program booklet, Madrid: Teatro Real 2017, pp. 1–43, here p. 14.

performance. From this perspective, I aim to make visible the diversity of working methods involved in the creation process, paying particular attention to the performance and aspects of production systems highly dependent on the opera house that carries out the commission.

This divergence leads me to focus on the element that gave rise to the *City of Lies*' conception: exploring narrative procedures. Mendoza and Rebstock intersperse four stories by the Uruguayan writer Juan Carlos Onetti (1909–1994) from constructing a structure that strives for a multidisciplinary balance, whose proposal reveals a technical peculiarity: the inquiry into the polyphonic compositional principle. Mendoza investigates the concept of polyphony in terms of the equality of its components and the integration of musical and dramaturgical actions based on their simultaneity and independence, without restricting themselves to the direction of the action through the voices. This perspective resonates with one of the central approaches that lead David Roesner and Matthias Rebstock to the concept of Composed Theatre, defining an artistic practice which "is highly characterized and unified by making use of compositional strategies and techniques and, in a broader sense, by the application of compositional thinking."[4] This study addresses specific scenes from which two perspectives are derived: the experimentation of the different dramaturgies through which it is intended, according to Elena Mendoza's words, "to tell a story with music."[5] How this act of "composing opera today" is part of the liminal exchanges of the operatic genre prompts me to consider the *City of Lies*' creative process as an object of discussion. This research emphasizes its potential to undermine the validity of the sequential production systems that have found a historic place in the leading institution of the performing arts in Spain: its main national opera house, the Teatro Real.

At that time, its artistic director, Gerard Mortier, devoted himself to creating Spanish operas during his tenure. After Elena Mendoza was

---

[4] Matthias Rebstock and David Roesner, eds., *Composed Theatre: Aesthetics, Practices, Processes*, Bristol and Chicago 2012, p. 19. Roesner and Rebstock defend three principles related to these ways of compositional thinking: firstly, the compositional strategies and techniques impact musical and extra-musical materials; secondly, an aesthetic based on the absence of hierarchies; thirdly, the compositional strategies emerge at the performance and during the artistic processes of creation. Ibid., p. 20.

[5] "Contar una historia con música," translation by the author, in: Mendoza and Rebstock, "Componer ópera hoy" (see nt. 3), p. 14.

commissioned in 2010, the composer selected several stories by Juan Carlos Onetti. The following expression manifests the reason for her choice: "I like its ambiguity."[6] For Mendoza, it was not relevant what Onetti said in his stories but how he expressed it. The same ambivalence between what and how could explain the critiques that fueled the premiere: Was it an opera? Some of the opinions judged *City of Lies* as "an opera that is not an opera,"[7] "an opera without singers?"[8] "Show, actually a music theatre, or if you like, a kind of performance,"[9] "disappointing as an opera but valuable as a musical expedition."[10] These interpellations to the genre, which have the potential to rebirth at any premiere in Spain, imply that this study seeks refuge in an attempt to question them. Faced with such evidence, I found the best synthesis in the following statement in the Teatro Real's magazine, *Revista del Real*: "*City of Lies* manages to turn the concept of traditional opera upside-down."[11]

The conditions under which such terminological confusion can be clarified lie in the work's subtitle, which was unnoticed: music theatre in fifteen scenes.[12] Through this concept, *City of Lies* stirred up the operatic genre on the country's leading stage: for the first time in 200 years, not an opera was staged, but a music theatre. This approach does not consider the what but the how of the *City of Lies* based on its creative process. For this, I attend to the expansion of the expressive means proposed by Mendoza and Rebstock according to two principles: on the one hand, the definition of a porous structure that experiments with narrativity by simultaneously interweaving both Onetti's stories and musical planes, and, on the other, the conjunction between compositional methods and the spontaneity

---

[6] "Me gusta su ambigüedad," translation by the author, in: Borja García Rosado, "La compositora Sevilla estrena ópera en el Teatro Real. Elena Mendoza," in: *Scherzo* XXXII (2017), no. 326, pp. 6–7, here p. 6.
[7] Roberto Herrscher, "Los cuentos de Onetti cantan, tocan y bailan en la ópera de Madrid," https://www.clarin.com/revista-enie/escenarios/cuentos-onetti-opera-madrid_0_Syp3dc4sg.html (accessed: 20 October 2020).
[8] Gabriel Ramírez Lozano, "*La ciudad de las mentiras*. ¿Una ópera sin cantantes?", in: *El Correo de Andalucía*, 25 February 2017, p. 35.
[9] Arturo Reverter, "Minucioso entretejido," *La Razón*, 21 February 2017, p. 57.
[10] Fernando Remiro, "World première of Elena Mendoza's *City of Lies* at Teatro Real," https://bachtrack.com/es_ES/review-mendoza-city-of-lies-teatro-real-madrid-february-2017 (accessed: 20 October 2020).
[11] José Miguel Torrente, ed., "Crear en paralelo el texto, la música y la puesta en escena enriquece muchísimo el resultado final," in: *La Revista del Real* 30 (2017), pp. 1–32, here p. 15.
[12] Elena Mendoza, *La ciudad de las mentiras*, program booklet, Madrid: Teatro Real 2017, pp. 1–43, here p. 3.

emanating from the performance, which becomes one of the foundations of devising creation in *City of Lies*.

Musicological studies that address music theatre are still scarce compared to dramatic and performative research frameworks. In this field, in addition to the volume *The New Music Theater*, edited by Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi,[13] it is necessary to recall the theoretical considerations of the co-author of *City of Lies*, Matthias Rebstock. The stage director has contributed to music theatre research, among others, with two publications: the first with David Roesner at *Composed Theatre: Aesthetics, Practices, Processes*;[14] and the second, in the chapter "Varieties of Independent Music Theatre in Europe."[15] Therefore, the above publications form the starting point for analyzing the aforementioned principles and lead me to discuss the nexus between stage and musical actions in *City of Lies*. Thus, this section addresses both performative issues and the creative process and production conditions that place the de-hierarchization of the work components in the foreground. Both perspectives aim to redefine the opera production based on the conventional creative sequence of libretto-score-staging; the latter and the cast's configuration depends in most cases on the opera house itself. Instead, Mendoza and Rebstock's proposal deconstructs this system to provide an artistic team whose members interact in the creative process from the beginning to the end.

Even if the *City of Lies*' productive methods reveal novelty to the recent Spanish opera, it is necessary to mention its configuration. Mendoza and Rebstock assembled an artistic team, which included the set designer Bettina Meyer, the costume designer Urs Schönebaum, Titus Engel as the conductor, and an ensemble that was distributed in three different locations in the Teatro Real's main hall: eleven soloists in the pit ensemble, seven in the Royal box and six on stage, where they interact with singers and actors.[16] *City of Lies* shapes a selection

---

[13] Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi, *The New Music Theater: Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body*, New York 2008.

[14] Rebstock and Roesner, *Composed Theatre* (see nt. 4).

[15] Matthias Rebstock, "Varieties of Independent Music Theatre in Europe," in: *Independent Theatre in Contemporary Europe. Structures, Aesthetics, Cultural Policy*, ed. Manfred Brauneck and ITI Germany, Bielefeld 2017, pp. 523–573.

[16] In addition to the four main roles (two sopranos, accordionist, and violist), tenor, baritone, and two actors, the instrumentation is set out as follows: ensemble on stage: clarinet, tenor saxophone, trombone, violin and cello; Pit ensemble: 1.0.2.0 - 0.0.1.0 - 2Perc. – Pf. - 1.1.1.1.1.; ensemble in the Royal box: 0.0.1.0. - 1.0.1.0. - 1 Ac. - 1 Sax. (si b) - 1.1.0.0.

of four stories by Onetti, in which all women play the lead role: *Un sueño realizado* (*A Dream Come True*) (1941), *El álbum* (*The Album*) (1953), *La novia robada* (*The Stolen Bride*) (1986), and *El infierno tan temido* (*Hell Most Feared*) (1962).[17] The music theatre overlaps its plotlines while emphasizing the four women's distorted existence, who hide in fiction to free themselves from a shared reality corrupted by the male residents and the imaginary city of Santa María itself, where the story takes place.

Three utopias: music theatre in the plural

In the program notes, Elena Mendoza and Matthias Rebstock defended the belief in a threefold creative utopia: collective, narrative, and supported by literary fiction.[18] Although these last two dimensions have an inescapable connection, the three, more than the possibility of a desirable project, constitute the nucleus in which the *City of Lies*' approach resides. Such a tripartite conception relates to two principles: the articulation of the structure from narrativity and the confluence of compositional and improvisational methods to articulate the work from their interrelation.

In this area, I consider Rebstock's statement according to the distinction that he underlines in his attempt to define music theatre:

> Aside from its broader sense, the term 'music theatre' is often used in a narrower sense, namely as a term which poses a contrast to opera. It is important to see that *this* concept of music theatre is not a pure genre designation, but instead goes along with an aesthetic claim […]: [m]usic theatre claims to be more progressive, flexible and up to date than 'opera,' the latter still being considered stodgy and aesthetically retrograde. Equally typical of this contrasting of 'opera' to 'music theatre' is an intermingling of aesthetic and institutional aspects.[19]

This symbiosis between aesthetic and institutional aspects determines the search for possible contributions that his proposal for a music theatre with Elena Mendoza has left to the latest opera creation at the Teatro Real. The key lies in the conditions under which the project was forged, which differed from the contexts of their precedent co-authorship music theatre: the reconsideration of

---

[17] Juan Carlos Onetti, *Cuentos Completos*, 8th ed., Madrid 1999.
[18] Mendoza and Rebstock, "Componer ópera hoy" (see nt. 3), pp. 14−15.
[19] Rebstock, "Varieties of Independent Music Theatre" (see nt. 14), p. 528.

the formats. *City of Lies* was a commission for a large opera house, whose stage provided few options to alter the spatial distribution of the hall, beyond the spatialization of sound through electronic devices. Thus, the Teatro Real itself represented a challenge for the musical and scenic conception of both authors compared to works such as *Niebla* (2007) and *Der Fall Babel* (2019), whose raison d'être was the chamber writing and the free spatial disposition that made flexible both the performative possibilities and the interaction with the audience. More than a constriction, this circumstance can be read from the creative use of the Teatro Real's boundaries to reinvent the institutional aspects related to production systems and its own space. Gerard Mortier's task was to give music theatre a priority by offering the main hall. Elena Mendoza admitted how after the Madrid premiere of *Niebla* at the Teatros del Canal in 2009,[20] Mortier claimed that opera houses had to attend these creations, which are more common on alternative circuits and festivals. Even though Mendoza and Rebstock considered other sceneries, the composer highlights how the artistic director imposed two conditions: a Spanish libretto and the Teatro Real.

The challenge of filling such a frontal Italian scenery acoustically was no less for the co-authors, who, as the composer assures, wanted to maintain the mobility of the various ensembles that they had already experienced with *Niebla*. If the audience in that project was located on either side of the stage, surrounded by a series of platforms and catwalks, the Teatro Real's ubiquity meant a complete reconsideration of their music theatre's conception.[21] These same confines carried over into exploring the artistic team's experience in the *City of Lies*' creative process.

In this regard, Rebstock's paper "On the Aesthetics and Working Process of Elena Mendoza's Music Theatre"[22] is illuminating. This text reveals the combination of traditional composition methods and experimentation from the collaboration in the composer's creative process, procedures close to the fields of contemporary dance and theatre. Rebstock's approach as co-author responds to

---

[20] *Niebla* was premiered at the Festspielhaus Hellerau in Dresden on September 29, 2007, and at the Konzerthaus Berlin on June 5, 2009. The Madrid premiere took place on June 20, 2009, with the same artistic team.
[21] Personal interview with Elena Mendoza (June 2020).
[22] Matthias Rebstock, "On the Aesthetics and Working Process of Elena Mendoza's Music Theatre," in: *Contemporary Music Review* 38 (2019) no. 1/2, pp. 180–192.

the first of the utopias that both the composer and the stage director had identified as the creative principle of *City of Lies*: collective. This perspective allows me to discuss both performance and the concept of authorship. Thus, Elena Mendoza points out the very long-term planning of creation, a temporality that collided with the production systems of the opera houses such as the Teatro Real. It is not usual, as the composer specifies, to propose pre-rehearsal phases.[23] This working method differs from the rehearsals of a finished creation. In this case, the opposite happens; the rehearsal is part of the creative process for composing in situ.[24] Mendoza admits that these first pre-rehearsals were produced in 2012 for a premiere scheduled in the 2014/15 season. However, Teatro Real took a new turn after Mortier's death in 2014, and they decided to postpone the *City of Lies*' premiere for two seasons, which made the permanence of the artistic team and the cast involved in the creation process uncertain.[25] As a result, the premiere itself constituted the most complex utopia.

Full polyphony

Jens Schubbe closed the program notes for the *City of Lies* with the expression "polyphonic whirlpool."[26] His semantic field fits in with Rebstock's epigraph assigned to the work: "Enhancing polyphony."[27] According to the co-authored creation, the polyphonic issue presents a broader perspective, tracing back to David Roesner and Clemens Risi's theories.[28] This collaborative conception of artistic practice that refers to devising theatre[29] has recently been explored in

---

[23] Personal interview with Elena Mendoza (June 2020).
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] "Remolino polifónico," translation by the author, Jens Schubbe, "*La ciudad de las mentiras. Observaciones sobre el teatro musical de Elena Mendoza y Matthias Rebstock,*" in: *La ciudad de las mentiras* (see nt. 3), pp. 1–43, here p. 19.
[27] Rebstock, "On the Aesthetics" (see nt. 21), pp. 187–190.
[28] See David Roesner and Clemens Risi, "Die polyphone Werkstatt. Kollektives Arbeiten im zeitgenössischen Musiktheater," in: *Theater der Zeit* 1 (2009), pp. 28–30; David Roesner, "The politics of the polyphony of performance: Musicalization in contemporary German theatre," in: *Contemporary Theatre Review* 18 (2008), no. 1, pp. 44–55.
[29] See Alison Oddey, *Devising Theatre. A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*, Abingdon and Nueva York 1994; Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling, *Devising Performance*, Hampshire and New York 2006; Emma Govan, Helen Nicholson, and Katie Normington, *Making a Performance. Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices*, Abingdon and New York 2007; Alex Mermikides and Jackie Smart, eds., *Devising in Process*, Basingstoke and New York 2009.

operatic research.[30] Rebstock also appealed to this proposal with Roesner in applying the concept to music theatre as "Composed Theatre."[31] In particular, Roesner addresses the polyphonic compositional principle transfer and even suggests calling it "intermedial polyphony."[32] To give an account of its relationship with the creative process of *City of Lies*, I refer to the words of Elena Mendoza, who explained to the Teatro Real what her compositional strategy consisted of:

> The basis of our work is a common ideal of music theatre in which the different elements that come together on stage [...] did not perceive in isolation but as a whole, as an organic mechanism in which music becomes theatre and theatre in music. For this, we create the text, the music, and the stage in parallel, sharing the authorship of the entire process, and not in successive steps as occurred in the traditional method. We also look for the set designer, the costume designer, and the interpreters very early on [...], and we do experimentation sessions with them almost from the beginning of the composition.[33]

These experimental sessions blur the boundaries between creators and performers in favor of the dialogue and dynamic encounters that combine improvisation with the configuration of sketches from which the jointly discussed creative decisions emerge. At a later stage, these are defined in more autonomous

---

[30] See Litha Efthymiou, "Devising an Opera. Myisi," in: *Contemporary Music Review* 35 (2016), no. 6, pp. 599–611; Sanne Krogh Groth, "Composers on Stage: Ambiguous Authorship in Contemporary Music Performance," in: *Contemporary Music Review* 35 (2016), no. 6, pp. 686–705.

[31] The authors offer, more than a definition of the term, a series of five characteristics, among which is the distinction between traditional working methods versus the collective creative process. In his chapter, Rebstock explained that: "'Composed Theatre' refers to the creative process and the performance of pieces that are determined by compositional strategies and, in a broader sense, by compositional thinking. However, 'compositional thinking' is an elusive term. The quest is for a definition that is sufficiently broad to accommodate the needs of different art forms, but sufficiently specific to give full value to the musically derived concept of composition as the productive theatrical force." Matthias Rebstock, "Composed Theatre: Mapping the Field," in: Rebstock and Roesner, *Composed Theatre* (see nt. 4), p. 22; Rebstock, "On the Aesthetics" (see nt. 21), p. 182.

[32] Roesner makes direct use of the concept of polyphony as: "a simultaneity of voices that allows an independence of its parts while providing structural linkage." David Roesner, "'It is not about labelling, it's about understanding what we do:' Composed Theatre as Discourse," in: Rebstock and Roesner, *Composed Theatre* (see nt. 4), p. 332.

[33] "La base de nuestro trabajo es un ideal común de teatro musical en el que los distintos elementos que confluyen en el escenario [...] no se perciban de manera aislada sino como un todo, como un mecanismo orgánico en el que la música pase a ser teatro y el teatro música. Para esto creamos el texto, la música y la puesta en escena en paralelo, compartiendo la autoría de todo el proceso, y no en pasos sucesivos como ocurría en el método tradicional. También buscamos desde muy pronto a la escenógrafa, a la figurinista y a los intérpretes [...] y hacemos con ellos sesiones de experimentación casi desde el principio de la composición," translation by the author, José Miguel Torrente, ed., "Crear en paralelo" (see nt. 11), p. 15.

work phases that include overlapping methods. These artistic practices move away from a libretto and a score fixed apart from the scenic and performative proposals. In this respect, Rebstock posed the scene from the beginning as a "precondition,"[34] which adopts a multidisciplinary balance from a genetic perspective. In addition to giving prominence to visual, spatial, physical, or performative aspects, this fact ratifies one of the main reasons for Composed Theatre: a more democratic approach to creation.[35] Therefore, the polyphonic concept is not only derived from experimenting with the creativity in *City of Lies* but adds two ideas that are as complementary as simultaneous: the interaction and independence of its components.[36]

This framework precisely links Onetti's four stories with the musical-scenic relationships on the same principle: the narrative exploration. The formal structure consolidates this search for narrative procedures through a combination of five types of scenes: aria, duet, radio news, text projection, and "gossip scene."[37] Such a distribution, which does not imply a fixed order, provides coherence to the music theatre while at the same time examining the possibilities of those common aspects to the selected stories: the city of Santa María, the coincidence of the main characters, the form of communication through the rumor that circulates among the male residents, and the refuge in fiction as the truth of the female protagonists to survive.

Simultaneously, the set design ensures cohesion by fixing a single space, which consists of several platforms connected by stairs where parallel actions occur around a central location, the bar. This design intended to visually fill the scene in the same way as the different sound planes did acoustically, primarily due to the lighting, and put a concrete stage event in the foreground while keeping other parallel stories in the dark. Mendoza alluded to the scenographic approach as a reflection of a permanently populated city so that the idea of polyphony not

[34] Rebstock, "On the Aesthetics" (see nt. 21), p. 183.
[35] Oddey, *Devising Theatre* (see nt. 28), pp. 8–11.
[36] Rebstock, "On the Aesthetics" (see nt. 21), p. 181.
[37] Schubbe, "*La ciudad de las mentiras*" (see nt. 25), p. 18.

only narrated musically and dramaturgically,[38] but was also transferred to the set design to materialize a polyphonic space,[39] as inferred from the following figure:

Figure 1: *City of Lies*. Set design by Bettina Meyer. Scene 1. "Hell Most Feared 1."
Photography: © Javier del Real. Madrid: Teatro Real (2017).

Similarly, the coexistence of several scenic spaces favors the intercalation of four plotlines; the musical treatment pursues a similar narrative intention through its differentiation. The main plot begins with *A Dream Come True,* a story that serves as a framework for developing the other three: Mr. Langman, a ruined theatre director, hires Santa María's residents to stage the dream of "An Unnamed Woman". Her dream, in which she dies, is performed at the end of the play, and catalyzes all the stories. Thus, *The Stolen Bride*, *The Album*, and *Hell*

[38] In the *Cuentos Completos*' foreword, the writer Antonio Muñoz Molina also alludes to the polyphony in Onetti: "In each story, there is a polyphony not only of voices but of different narratives, which perhaps were born as ideas for stories, but which left adding one to the other according to the laws and secret affinities that are revealed by themselves in the invention process." ["En cada novela hay una polifonía no solo de voces, sino de narraciones distintas, que acaso nacieron como ideas para cuentos pero que se fueron agregando las unas a las otras según las leyes y las afinidades secretas que van revelándose como por sí mismas en el proceso de invención."], translation by the author, Antonio Muñoz Molina, "Sueños realizados: invitación a los relatos de Juan Carlos Onetti," in: Onetti, *Cuentos Completos* (see nt. 16), p. 18.
[39] Personal interview with Elena Mendoza (June 2020).

Most Feared run simultaneously and, as in *A Dream Come True*, have a woman as the protagonist. Each of these four stories presents its specific sound materials, besides having two soloists perform the leading roles in *The Stolen Bride* and *The Album*: Moncha, with the viola, and Carmen, with the accordion. Both instruments become sound objects whose musical articulation mixes with the expression of their performers' spoken language. Considering the sonority of these diverse stories, I refer to the following descriptive-analytical comments by Jens Schubbe, which are included in the program notes:

> If the percussive and metric character dominates in *The Album*, *The Stolen Bride*'s fundamental element is the contrast between a morbid sound, which often turns into amorphous noise, in Dr. Díaz Grey's funeral speeches, and the stratospheric sounds of the Moncha's viola. *A Dream Come True* corresponds to a delicate and chamber filigree on the wind instruments, perhaps echoing what some dreams [...] can be touching for those who dream them. On the contrary, *Hell Most Feared* assigned dramatic sounds in *tutti* and some very plastic motivic ideas that are recognizable and thus give the whole work a unitary framework, which is further reinforced thanks to its early exposure to the introduction of the play.[40]

Therefore, each story corresponds to precise instrumentation and stage space, the timbral distinction which is diluted in the tangles that unfold in the bar. This central scene is staged by the men of Santa María, performers who, like Moncha and Carmen, play and interact through dialogue, their gestures, and movements. Moreover, this ensemble on stage underlines the coincidence of the simultaneous sound layers in the pit and the Royal box ensembles. On the occasion of the premiere, Mendoza revealed how experimenting with the Teatro Real's main hall highlighted concrete meanings:

> The Royal box itself seems like a stage. A stage that looks at another location [...] helps to create an enveloping sound atmosphere for the audience, which serves very well to convey the oppressive character of Santa María, a city closed in on

---

[40] "Si en *El álbum* domina el carácter percusivo y métrico, el elemento fundamental en *La novia robada* es el contraste entre una sonoridad mórbida, que a menudo se convierte en ruido amorfo, en los discursos fúnebres del doctor Díaz Grey, y los sonidos estratosféricos de la viola de Moncha. A *Un sueño realizado* le corresponde una filigrana delicada y camerística en los instrumentos de viento, quizás eco de lo que algunos sueños [...] pueden tener de profundamente conmovedor para quienes los están soñando. A *El infierno tan temido* se le asignan, por el contrario, dramáticas sonoridades en *tutti* y algunas ideas motívicas muy plásticas que son reconocibles y que de este modo confieren a toda la obra un marco unitario, lo que se ve reforzado aún más gracias a su temprana exposición en la introducción de la obra.", translation by the author, Schubbe, "La ciudad de las mentiras" (see nt. 25), p. 19.

itself, with a conformist society from which it is difficult to escape. Indeed, this box acts as a window, an escape route for the different characters. It is like the river, an element so present in Onetti as the only way out.[41]

Given the difficulty of adapting the creation to a stage with such dimensions as the Teatro Real, Mendoza mentioned how she proposed maintaining an external acoustic element beyond the stage located behind the audience. In addition to an enveloping sound, this ensemble in the Royal box provided the inclusion of dialogues between the various acoustic planes, corresponding to the symbolism of the river.[42] Furthermore, this ensemble stood in front of the four windows distributed through the scenic space,[43] where several virtual images continuously offered a moving river. Both opposing realities confront the hermeticism of Santa María, a city whose resigned men wear shirts with designs similar to those on the bar floor where their lives seem to have meaning. I focus on *The Stolen Bride* to address this interaction of scenic and musical actions based on *City of Lies*' narrative principles. I choose this particular story because it introduces two of the

[41] "El palco Real en sí mismo parece un escenario. Un escenario que mira a otro escenario [...] contribuye a crear una atmósfera envolvente para el público, que sirve muy bien para transmitir el carácter opresivo de Santa María, una ciudad encerrada a sí misma, con una sociedad conformista, de la que es difícil escapar. Aunque ese palco, para los protagonistas, opera como una especie de ventana, una posibilidad de fuga. Es como el río, un elemento tan presente en Onetti, como único camino hacia el exterior.", translation by the author, Alberto Ojeda and Elena Mendoza, "La escritura de Onetti deja mucho espacio a la música;" https://elcultural.com/Elena-Mendoza-La-escritura-de-Onetti-deja-mucho-espacio-a-la-musica (accessed: 15 October 2020).

[42] In *The Album*, Onetti refers to the river in these words: "In Santa María, when night comes, the river disappears, it recedes without any waves in the shadow like a carpet that is rolled up; rhythmically, the field invades from the right –at that moment we are all turned towards the north–, it occupies us, and also the river bed. The nocturnal solitude in the water or on its shore can offer, I suppose, the memory, or nothingness or a future volunteer; the night of the plain that extends punctually and indomitable only allows us to find ourselves, lucid and in the present." ["En Santa María, cuando llega la noche, el río desaparece, va retrocediendo sin olas en la sombra como una alfombra que enrollaran; acompasadamente, el campo invade por la derecha –en ese momento estamos todos vueltos hacia el norte–, nos ocupa el lecho del río. La soledad nocturna en el agua o a su orilla, puede ofrecer, supongo, el recuerdo, o la nada o un voluntario futuro; la noche de la llanura que se extiende puntual e indominable solo nos permite encontramos con nosotros mismos, lúcidos y en presente."], translation by the author, Juan Carlos Onetti, *El álbum*, in: *Cuentos Completos* (see nt. 16), pp. 184–185.

[43] On the windows is projected a fragment of text corresponding to *Hell Most Feared* that Scene 12 stars on the same story, which says: "Outside, the night was weighty, and the city's open windows mixed with the milky mystery of the sky the mysteries of the lives of men, their eagerness, and their customs." ["Afuera la noche estaba pesada y las ventanas abiertas de la ciudad mezclaban al misterio lechoso del cielo los misterios de las vidas de los hombres, sus afanes y sus costumbres."], translation by the author, Ibid., p. 225.

work's fundamental themes: the city and the lies. The scenes that correspond to *The Stolen Bride* are Scene 5, 10, 13, and 14,[44] as I show in the table below:

Scene 5	Scene 10	Scene 13	Scene 14
"The Stolen Bride 1" Moncha's aria	"The Stolen Bride 2" Duo for Moncha-Doctor Díaz Grey	"The Stolen Bride 3"	"The Stolen Bride 4" Gossip scene /Radio scene
Moncha (viola) Trombone Violin Cello Piano Pit ensemble	Moncha (viola) Doctor Díaz Grey (an actor) Pit ensemble Ensemble in the Royal box	Moncha (viola) Tito (percussionist) Trombone Violin Cello Piano	Moncha (viola) Actors Singers (except Mr. Langman) Men of Santa María

Figure 2: *City of Lies*. "The Stolen Bride." Table based on the index of scenes by Elena Mendoza and Matthias Rebstock. © C. F. Peters LTD & Co. KG.

The spatialization of *City of Lies* extends to the use of projections that intrinsically affect its narrative structure. This visual strategy articulates the beginning and the end of the music theatre around *The Stolen Bride*, in whose story Onetti prematurely portrays the two main concepts – the city and the lies –, in a literary attempt that differs from the rest of his stories by its conception of fiction.[45] Thus, in its first paragraph, this particular projection gives a glimpse into the whole context of the story: "Nothing was happening in Santa María. It was in autumn. The shining sweetness of a dying, sporadic sun, slowly going out. For the full range of Santa María residents who looked heavenwards and earthwards before accepting the proper absurdity of work."[46] While the rest of the stories barely mention Santa María, Onetti begins *The Stolen Bride* by combining both motives:

[44] The lead roles are performed by Anna Spina as Moncha (viola), Graham Valentine as Doctor Díaz Grey (actor), and Tobias Dutschke as Tito, the waiter (percussion).
[45] On Onetti's stories, see the foreword in Muñoz Molina, "Sueños realizados" (see nt. 37), pp. 11-26.
[46] Elena Mendoza, "Summary", in: *La ciudad de las mentiras* (see nt. 3), pp. 1–43, here, p. 9. Program notes; Onetti, *Cuentos Completos* (see nt. 16), p. 323.

"Nothing was happening in Santa María that autumn until the time came – whether cursed or missing or determined and inescapable – until the happy hour of the lie and the yellow insinuates itself on the edges of the Venetian laces."[47]

Moncha is the only character introduced and performed through the projections.[48] Her presentation in Scene 5 connects to a projected fragment of *The Album* alluding to the river,[49] and the closure of the music theatre involves a simultaneous dramatic action. While the beginning of *The Stolen Bride* is projecting, Dr. Díaz Grey certifies Moncha's death by reciting the final paragraph of the same story.[50]

Figure 3: *City of Lies*. Scene 15. "Finale." © Javier del Real. Madrid: Teatro Real (2017).

[47] Translation by the author, Onetti, *Cuentos Completos* (see nt. 16), pp. 1008–1020.
[48] In Scene 9, corresponding to *The Album*, Carmen also interprets her aria with the accordion while fragments of text pass in the windows that show the river.
[49] Another fragment of *The Album* will be used on the same content of the river: "When night comes, we run out of the river and the sirens that vibrate in the port, they become the bellowing of lost cows and the storms in the water sound like a dry wind between wheat fields, over bent mountains. May each man be alone and look at himself until he is rotten, without memory or tomorrow; that face without secrets for all eternity." ["Cuando llega la noche nos quedamos sin río y las sirenas que vibran en el puerto, se transforman en mugidos de vacas perdidas y las tormentas en el agua suenan como un viento seco entre trigales, sobre montes doblados. Que cada hombre esté solo y se mire hasta pudrirse, sin memoria ni mañana; esa cara sin secretos para toda la eternidad."], translation by the author, Ibid., p. 185.
[50] The recitation starts when "An Unnamed Woman" from *A Dream Come True* died on stage, a story that brings together the other three. Ibid., p. 342.

In this mixed team of female soloists, integrated into the scenic ensemble of actors, singers, and instrumentalists, Mendoza decided to assign Moncha's viola an imaginary role. The choice of this particular string instrument symbolically corresponds to Moncha's boyfriend, and the co-authors intended to make them interact both instrumentally and vocally.[51]

In order to properly understand this relationship, I first refer to the summary of *The Stolen Bride* as it appeared in the program notes:

> In *The Stolen Bride*, Dr. Díaz Grey, one of Santa María's most eminent residents, retrospectively declares his love to a young woman called Moncha Insaurralde at her open graveside. Moncha, who had been sent to Europe by her family to separate her from her young lover Marcos Bergner, returns to Santa María, intending to marry him. But in the meantime, Marcos has died, along with everybody else she had left behind. Moncha decides to ignore these circumstances and makes herself a sumptuous wedding dress, which she then parades around Santa María and which she wears each moonlit night to celebrate her wedding to an imaginary Marcos. The gradual deterioration of the dress will mark the girl's decline until the inexorable end.[52]

Owing to recreate Moncha's madness both on stage and musically, the violist's voice merges with the timbre of her viola-lover, whom she speaks, sings, plays; it seems like she is touching him, and even inviting him to have dinner by sitting him in front of her at the bar in Scene 13.[53] Nevertheless, the narration around Moncha is always produced by the others' voices, especially in an epistolary form that makes any communication impossible. Doctor Díaz Grey writes the letter in which he confesses his love to enter into a dialogue with the already dead woman, just as Moncha does with Marcos. The difference between the two interactions with death, or rather with each other's silence, is that it only happens between Moncha and her imaginary boyfriend in *City of Lies*. If Onetti counted on the

---

[51] Elena Mendoza told how they ruled out the use of wind instruments for female soloists' roles due to the impossibility of speaking while performing. Personal interview with Elena Mendoza (June 2020).

[52] Mendoza, "Summary" (see nt. 45), pp. 9, 11.

[53] Personal interview with Elena Mendoza (June 2020). Mendoza explained to us how this symbology between the instruments and the characters or objects in Onetti's stories was also produced in *The Album*: Carmen interprets the accordion, simile, among other ideas, the suitcase that accompanies her throughout the story, and where the protagonist preserves the photos that later reveal the reality of the trips she had narrated and that the men of Santa María believed imaginary.
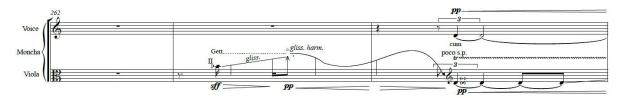
bride's speech to die out,[54] Mendoza and Rebstock gave the main characters a voice in three discursive levels, sometimes juxtaposed, sometimes simultaneous: Moncha-viola, Moncha-Díaz Grey, and Moncha-ensembles. These three strata bring together the issuer's narrative perspectives, Díaz Grey, telling what he knows, what others are saying, and a version sifted through a fragmented memory or invention.[55]

The gossip scenes emphasize this narrative's ambivalence between self-abandonment and self-dissolution among those who speculate in the bar about the reality of Moncha and the fiction that she invents to get married every moonlit night. The men of Santa María, accomplices of her madness, attend the ritual evoked in Scene 5, which constitutes Moncha's first appearance. Mendoza and Rebstock simulate a liturgy in which part of the ensemble on the stage participates: trombone, violin, cello, and piano. The bride initiates the ceremony by playing the viola while declaiming some Latin fragments, which belong to blessings from the nuptial rite that the co-authors randomly mix up. When the immense wedding dress begins to invade the scene, the ceremony involves three consecutive actions. As a result, Moncha starts singing just a few passages of the liturgical text, atomizing the syllables into notes held at specific pitches. This scene leads to a de-semantization of the language by temporarily distributing the content of the text. These pitches dilute until they finally become indeterminate at the end of the Latin declamation. In turn, the protagonist plays the same pitches on the viola through trills or tremolo figures, as if the lover's voice resounded in her words, which I set out below along with two musical examples:

---

[54] A study on the influence of the epistolary genre in *The Stolen Bride* can be seen in Tatiana Suárez Turriza, "Cartas a *La novia robada* de Juan Carlos Onetti, un juego specular," in: *Revista Escritos BUAP* (2016), no. 1, pp. 1–20.

[55] As an example, some paragraphs begin with expressions such as: "They told me, Moncha, that this story had already been written," "I said, Moncha, that it does not matter because it is just a love letter," "Moncha, again, I remember, and I know that regiments saw you and used you naked," "And it is a lie, but I saw you parade in front of the church," "We knew, it became known, that she slept like dead in the house." ["Me dijeron, Moncha, que esta historia ya había sido escrita", "Dije, Moncha, que no importa porque se trata, apenas, de una carta de amor", "Moncha, otra vez, recuerdo y sé que regimientos te vieron y usaron desnuda", "Y es mentira, pero te vi desfilar frente a la iglesia", "Sabíamos, se supo, que dormía como muerta en la casona."], translation by the author, Onetti, *Cuentos Completos* (see nt. 16), pp. 323–327.

Moncha (bars 247–271): "Floreatis cum praesentium copiis, fructificatis decenter in filis, gaudeatis perenniter cum amicie."[56]

Example 1: Elena Mendoza's *La ciudad de las mentiras*. Scene 5 (bars 262–264).
Moncha: voice and viola. Edition Peters, EP14044. © Copyright 2014 by Henry Litolff's Verlag. Reproduced by permission.

Example 2: Elena Mendoza's *La ciudad de las mentiras*. Scene 5 (bars 267–269).
Moncha: voice and viola. Edition Peters, EP14044. © Copyright 2014 by Henry Litolff's Verlag. Reproduced by permission.
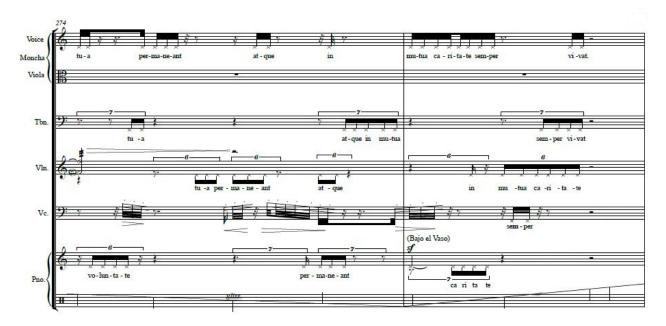
After Moncha's declamation, the second dramatic action takes place. The ensemble on the stage joins her to imitate the same fragments of the rite as if they were attending the wedding ceremony from the bar. This collective intonation maintains a constant tessitura and a syllabic emission from a rhythm that seems to follow Latin prosody. Meantime, the text is gradually fragmented and spatialized among the men of Santa María. The text that Moncha and the ensemble interspersed, mixing various wedding blessings, is the following:

> Ensemble on the stage and Moncha (bars 271–282): "Fidelitatem integram suo sponso tenens, in pace, et voluntate tua permaneat, atque in mutua charitate semper vivat"[57] / "detque vobis sua dilectionis dulcedinem et saeculi praesentis

---

[56] Elena Mendoza's *La ciudad de las mentiras*. Scene 5, bars 247–271. Edition Peters, EP14044. Copyright 2014 by Henry Litolff's Verlag. Ex Manuali Toletano in: *Rituale Romanum*, *Pauli V Jussu Editum*, *cum cantu Toletano and Appendice ex Manuali Toletano*, Matriti In Typographia Regia, vulgo de la Gazeta (1775), p. 469.

[57] Elena Mendoza's *La ciudad de las mentiras*. Scene 5, bars 271–275 (see nt. 55). Ritus celebrandi matrimonii sacramentum, Titulus VII, Caput II, in: *Rituale Romanum. Pauli V*, *Jussu editum*, *Typicam Vaticanam*, Gestel S. Michaëlis Ex typographia Vicariatus Apostolici Buscoducensis (1849), p. 167.

felicitate laetari"[58] / "inter prospera et adversa in aegra et sana valetudine ut te diligam et honorem"[59].

Example 3: Elena Mendoza's *La ciudad de las mentiras*. Scene 5 (bars 274–275). Moncha and ensemble on the stage (trombone, violin, cello, and piano). Edition Peters, EP14044.
© Copyright 2014 by Henry Litolff's Verlag. Reproduced by permission.

Finally, in the third dramatic action, both the ensemble and Moncha together declaim in tempo the last Latin words of the fictional ceremony (bars 283–284): "Dum mors nos divitat."[60] This expression will appear in a murmuring effect foreshadowing the main characters' death, as in the final Scene 15, where the four stories converge, and the suicides of Risso – *The Album* – and "An Unnamed Woman" – *A Dream Come True* – occur.

The viola's timbral concept, which in *The Stolen Bride* approaches a fusion with Moncha's voice, extends to the low register of the piano harp. The pianist, one of Santa María's men, uses a superball to extract sounds close to speech. This sound overwhelms the scene at the end of the nuptial rite, and then a funeral speech begins. Drawing upon this contrast, Dr. Díaz Grey recites his monologue at the piano, the symbol of Moncha's coffin. With regret, and for the first time,

---

[58] Ibid., Scene 5, bars 277–279 (see nt. 56). Ritus celebrandi matrimonii (see nt. 55), p. 291.
[59] Ibid., Scene 5, bars 280–282 (see nt. 56). Ordo celebrandi matrimonium, in: *Edition typica altera, Typis polyglottis Vaticanis* (1991), p. 62.
[60] "Dum mors nos dividat" was also the title of the first movement of Elena Mendoza's work *Zwei Szenen: Für Viola Solo und Instrumentengruppen* (2019), which were commissioned by the Ensemble Modern and premiered on January 6, 2020 at the Kölner Philharmonie.

the actor confesses his love to her and recounts how she went out to celebrate her illusory marriage at night. This retrospective dialogue with Moncha's corpse contrasts with that of the lover, whom the bride simultaneously recreates on her viola.

Along with Dr. Díaz Grey's monologue, the pianist improvises inside the piano with the superballs and imitates his speech on the resonant and freely muted strings. This sound effect underlines the expressiveness when the actor bends his body over the piano and recites some fragments almost glued to the strings. When Dr. Díaz Grey refers to the wedding dress, Moncha responds to the lament by mimicking the piano's speech from the same position in which she celebrated her wedding on the highest platform of the stage. Her improvisation is based on a series of descending intervals – minor second, minor third, and major second –, a figuration that the men of Santa María – trombone, violin, and cello – use on different pitches to join the dialogue by improvising over Moncha's musical gestures. This imitation game densifies the texture and gradually increases the dynamics until Moncha's initial melodic gesture is deformed, and it parallels the grief and fuzzy memories of Dr. Díaz Grey.[61]

This network of music and dramatic actions that arise around Moncha presents a common visual element: the wedding dress. I previously stated how it spread in the scene during the wedding ceremony (Scene 5), specifically in Scenes 10, 13, and 14 when the dress begins to deteriorate in parallel with the protagonist wearing it. Thus, Moncha loses pieces of her wedding dress that Dr. Díaz Grey will pick up after her steps. The only real dialogue between them occurs in Scene 10 when Moncha visits the doctor's office while interacting with her lover on the viola. The duo shows dysfunctional communication: Moncha tries to ask the doctor to repeat her self-diagnosis, "I am going to get married, I am going to die" (bars 606–607). Despite this disturbing conversation, Moncha's desperation forces her to seek beyond this connection. Both the violas in the pit and the Royal box ensembles initiate a 'dialogue' with her through melodic gestures that have already appeared in Scene 5. This sound dimension refers to her lover's echo that extends to the magnitude that Moncha's fiction attains due to an attempt to escape the oppressive atmosphere of Santa María.

[61] Personal interview with Elena Mendoza (June 2020).

Example 4: Elena Mendoza's *La ciudad de las mentiras*. Scene 10 (bars 599–602). Viola solo.
Pit ensemble. Dialogue with Moncha. Peters Edition, EP14044. © Copyright 2014 by Henry
Litolff's Verlag. Reproduced by permission.

If these simultaneous scenes show dramatic actions narratively linked to musical
actions, the attention to the performers' creativity is no less noticeable in the
scenes where the improvisation rules. By Scene 13, each instrumental line
material was fixed, but this scene manifests how *City of Lies*' creative process has
its fundamental reason in the performative act itself. Unlike the rest of the work,
Scene 13 contains only one text indicating the dramatic plot, the characters
participating in it, and the fragment that one of the Santa María's residents – Tito,
the waiter – has to recite. These instructions articulate an extreme way of
revealing the various degrees of fixation of the work, a procedure that contrasts
elements absolutely determined with those that obtain their final form in the
performance, that is, during rehearsals. Here is where the creative process
acquires importance as it experiments with the proposals that are brought about

as a team until the definitive version is offered in the representation.[62] Therefore, the result is not a live improvisation as such, but rather a performance of the decisions that were not laid down in the score, resulting from the collective improvisation within the different experimental sessions.

This final configuration comes in Scene 13 from the main character's corporeality. In this case, the men of Santa María – the trombonist, violinist, cellist, and pianist –, try to capture Tito's movements – the waiter, a percussionist – when he serves dinner to Moncha, who in her fiction invites her viola-lover on a date at the bar. Accomplices of Moncha's lie, this ensemble rhythmically synchronizes the dramatic action with the instrumental sound. Elena Mendoza declared how attempting to compose this scene thwarted its immediacy. The composer explained the efficiency that this scene gained by creating itself in situ so that when looking at the waiter, the ensemble directly performs his gestures directly without other guidance.

Figure 4. *City of Lies*. Scene 13. Tito and Moncha at the dinner with her viola-lover.
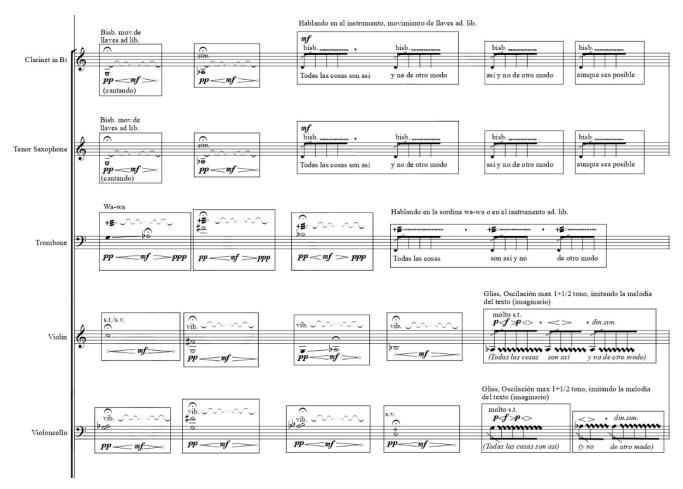© Javier del Real. Madrid: Teatro Real (2017).

[62] Personal interview with Elena Mendoza (June 2020).

They tried different gestures and movements during the rehearsals until they found the sounds that suited them best. Simultaneously, the percussionist who played Tito's role improvised with diverse sound objects, such as the bottle of wine, the cutlery, the crockery, the tray, or the tablecloth, to which he gave a dramaturgical meaning.[63]

Regardless of the contrast between the fixed and improvised scenes, Mendoza explained how her interest lay in their relationship. Although the sound synchronized with the movement is not determined in the score, Mendoza defines the reference material on which the performers should improvise, specifically from bars 262–279 of Scene 5. Thus, the same material assumes completely different sound results depending on the performers' freedom to recreate it, according to the agreements reached during the rehearsals. Hence, the final improvisation is not entirely split from the score, even though only a brief textual script appears. Scene 14 sheds light on this point when Moncha leaves the bar after dinner. The ensemble on the stage improvises a gossip scene from materials that are fixed in modules, and they arrange freely to evoke a continuous murmur.[64] The string players speak directly while playing, whereas the winds speak within their instrument.

[63] Ibid.
[64] Text from *The Stolen Bride* improvised by the men of Santa María: "All things are like this and not otherwise; although it is possible to shuffle four times thirteen after they occurred, and they are irremediable." ["Todas las cosas son así y no de otro modo; aunque sea posible barajar cuatro veces trece después que ocurrieron y son irremediables."], translation by the author, Onetti, *Cuentos Completos* (see nt. 16), p. 338.

Example 5: Elena Mendoza's *La ciudad de las mentiras*. Scene 14. "The Stolen Bride 4."
(bar 875). The ensemble on the stage: clarinet, tenor saxophone, trombone, violin, and cello.
Edition Peters, EP14044. © Copyright 2014 by Henry Litolff's Verlag.
Reproduced by permission.

Here Moncha's statement is confirmed, although only the last premonition is fulfilled: she is going to get married, she is going to die. The men of Santa María take up the mourning image at the piano and narrate together with Dr. Díaz Grey the fate of her tragedy: the death of both Marcos Bergner and the priest who would marry them. Outside the scene, Moncha, who has already lost a large part of her wedding dress, imitates the piano improvisation based on the interval relations described above while the men of Santa María speculate about her existence at her piano-coffin. This random exchange of gossip that had accompanied Moncha's exit culminates in a free improvisation of all the men on stage with superballs in the piano. Like Onetti's epistle, this image refers to the dialogue with what remains of the protagonist's already missing echo voice. This distorted narrative of Moncha's identity, deprived of its own story, becomes

permeable both dramatically and musically for the rest of the stories in the last Scene 15, "Finale." The ending of *A Dream Come True* constitutes the structural framework in which the "An Unnamed Woman"'s dream is staged. This ending contributes to a dramaturgical cohesion that overlays the end of all stories as parts of the same dream. If the previous scenes had partially exposed the instrumentation, this scene brings the pit and the Royal box ensembles together. The textual accumulation of recurring sentences from each story, which circulate indistinctly through all the characters' voices, is interspersed with sound materials from Scene 1, "Hell Most Feared 1." Nonetheless, Scene 1 featured both the ensemble on the stage and the murmur within the bar, which defines the profile of the improvisation scenes throughout the work.[65] This "Finale" can be considered as the maximum exponent of the polyphonic concept in *City of Lies*, in that all the storylines are dissolved in a textual, musical, visual, and spatial polyphony, that is, a Composed Theatre.

Music theatre safe from the context of opera houses

The dramatic form interactions with vocal and instrumental writing emphasize how *City of Lies* orients itself towards other less predictable elements, such as costumes, light, space, or stage movement. This interrelation shows a de-hierarchization of the dramaturgies in favor of a composition that focuses on expressing musical actions and actions with music. Hence, this linkage unveils how the visual becomes a source to generate associations that impact the musical formalization itself: the piano appears to be a coffin, the accordion a suitcase, the viola an imaginary lover, and the ensembles' spatialization explores the possibilities of an immovable stage. It is precisely the suppression of the distances between the different disciplines from the creative process that reverses the possibility of questioning the conventions of opera and music theatre creation and the one-dimensionality of its production systems.

If visual dramaturgy constitutes an evident nucleus in the conception of *City of Lies*, its working methods, in which composition is fused with writing, debate, research, or design, involves discussing both the interaction and the boundaries

---

[65] Personal interview with Elena Mendoza (June 2020).

of two artistic practices: creation and performance. Instead of being understood as stable categories in Mendoza and Rebstock's music theatre, creation and performance are focal points for experimentation to redefine their concepts and aspects related to authorship. This inquiry is blurred at the different phases of rehearsals according to the artists' ideas and the stage and movement attempts that define the final fixed and unfixed materials. The opportunity to decide the combination of the preset materials in the score does not encompass live improvisation. Instead, improvisation itself serves as a tool for experimentation and creation. This practice has a direct impact on the composition methods, mainly on the stage itself. Therefore, this performative potential compromises the daily artistic life of the opera houses, for which it is problematic to articulate such a strongly determined team and conceive rehearsal phases in order to create these conditions in advance; conditions which often go beyond their schedule in terms of time and budget.[66] Hence, the habitual set design, which is only exposed during the final rehearsals, breaks the balance of a productive approach that integrates it from the beginning of the creative process as the primary element that determines the others' artistic outcome.

Similarly, a reflection from the *City of Lies*' reception follows on from this reconsideration of working methods and production systems. Most of the critiques only dealt with singing voices, precisely because of their quantity, as if that were the only parameter to be assessed.[67] Mendoza confirmed the difficulty of overcoming this code in the Teatro Real, a scenery in which music theatre was not experienced in. As a result, this background does not prevent *City of Lies* from being compared to what it does not want to resemble in the least.

Accordingly, some of the criteria that govern Composed Theatre reveal elements far removed from mere addition and the dramaturgical condition under generally sequential principles determined by singing. This attention to the performance itself and its possibilities as a dramatic action provides new prospects for operatic creation. In this regard, the approach to narrative procedures in *City of Lies* requires investigating other structural and formal principles beyond voice and orchestral conception. Thus, the creative reflection

---

[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.

of the auditorium acoustics, the visual associations, or the search for sounds that consider the kinetic rhythms and the spoken language expand the means of expression by entering into those stories created and falsified by the lonely men of Santa María's memory. This same timeless claustrophobic context, familiar to all the Onettian stories and the first music theatre to be premiered at the Teatro Real, shaped a unique event that has never been repeated. In this lack of consensus in the dialogue between both genres in opera houses, this contextual restriction is what the music theatre, like the Onettian women, must break free from, if possible, without escaping into fiction.[68]