

The Composing Conductor

Postscript and Reflection by Assistant Professor Malene Rigtrup

Purpose and Background

The artistic and pedagogical research project *The Composing Conductor* took place in the academic year 2021-22 at The Royal Academy of Music Aarhus/Aalborg (RAMA Vocal Center), led by assistant professor Malene Rigtrup. The goal was, through the exploration of different artistic and pedagogical strategies, to add a creative element to the role of the choir leader. The intention was to infuse the “rhythmic vocal music” genre with even more artistic integrity.

The contemporary choral and vocal music scene is currently undergoing great development and receiving a lot of interest internationally. But, most often, its performers are reproducing existing compositions. There is a need for the birth of a new and more independent artistic direction for the genre, focusing on new, original, idiomatic, choral works.

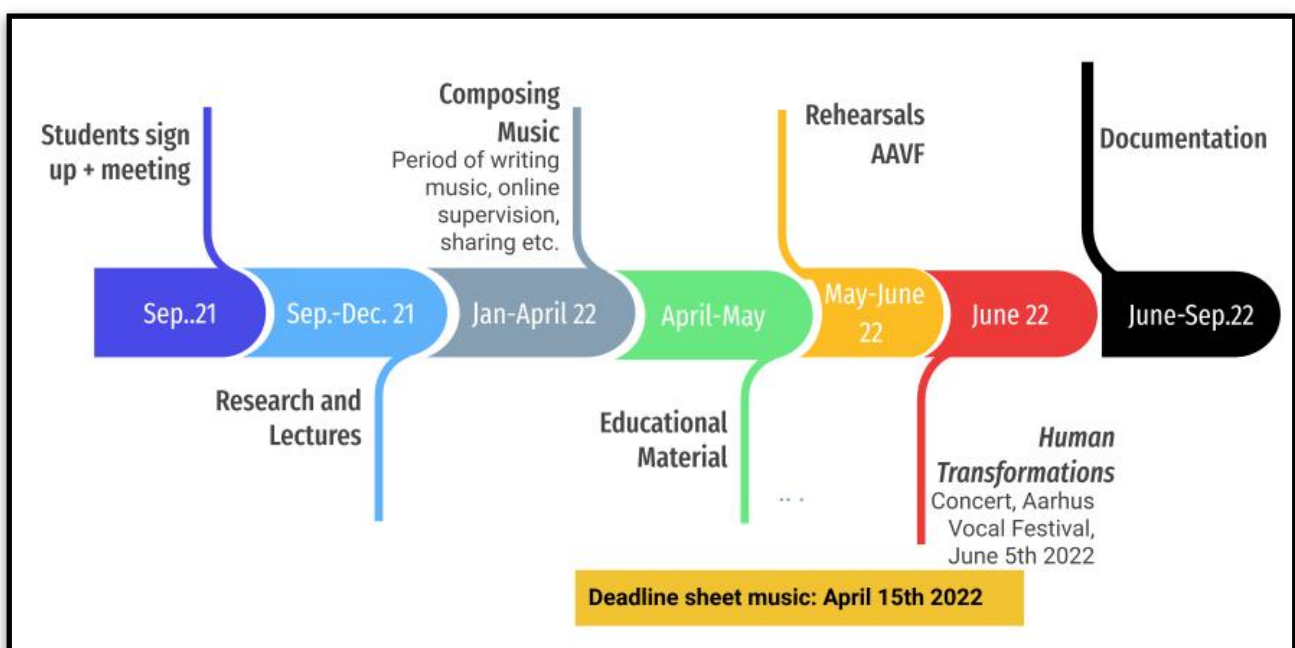
Seventeen international and Danish students from five different courses at The Royal Academy of Music Aarhus/Aalborg, (mainly from RAMA Vocal Center), participated in the project as active co-creators. The project mostly took place online organised on Zoom and Moodle.

Contents

The project has been divided into four main pillars, which are further described in the following section (see also poster p.18):

- **Research/Lectures**
- **New Vocal Compositions**
- **Educational Material**
- **Documentation**

Project timeline:



Research and Lectures

The project's first semester focused on inspiration for composition. Seven different presenters (see poster p.18) were invited to give an online lecture on a self-selected topic within vocal composition. Each lecture was recorded on video so that the students who could not attend could watch it afterwards. Teachers and students from the conservatory who were not part of the project were also invited. The fact that the lectures took place online gave great flexibility. Several students expressed that they had re-watched several of the sessions and thereby achieved greater reflection and learning. They were inspired by the lecturers' very individual approaches, their extensive experience and the concrete material they presented. Several of the lecturers said that it was important to "just get started, to practice" and "there is no right or wrong when composing". These were simple but important statements for the students who were experienced vocal arrangers but inexperienced composers.

New Vocal Compositions

In the second semester of the project, students worked either individually or in groups to compose their own works. The goal was to perform the finished compositions at the *Aarhus Vocal Festival* in June 2022 under the heading *Human Transformations*. From January to April, the students worked on their compositions with the possibility of online supervision provided by me, as well as few sessions with soloist student Philip Eick. Along the way, there were two "stepping stones", where all students met online to present their works-in-progress with sheet music and recordings to the rest of the team. These sessions provided a forum for peer feedback and inspiration, as well as a sense of community around the project, which made the work feel more manageable overall. Students were given reassurance that they "were well on their way" these sessions, which served to divide the work into sub-goals.

By the deadline in April 2022, the students had created 10 new choral works together. These were performed at the concert *Human Transformations* at the *Aarhus Vocal Festival* in a packed *Lille sal* in *Musikhuset Aarhus* on 5th June 2022. The students conducted their own compositions at the concert, with several also performing as singers. In addition, a large number of choirs and vocal groups participated as local and international partners: Maestra (DK, Aarhus Music School), Postyr Project (DK, an internationally known vocal group), AIRO (DK, a choir from Aarhus), SONO (DK, a choir from Aarhus) and Voice Event (Germany, a youth choir). In total, over 120 singers were on stage during the concert.



See video from the concert *Human Transformations* here:

<https://musikkons.dk/en/what-else/research-and-development/educational-development/the-composing-conductor/>

Educational Material

In my teaching on the subject *Vocal Arrangement* at *The RAMA Vocal Center*, I have in the last 3-4 years supplemented the subject with small, concrete composition tasks. I have further developed these in the teaching material *The Composing Conductor* on the basis of written feedback, reflection and evaluation from the students. In what follows, I try to summarise the students' reflections and feedback together with my own strategies for teaching (see also the section "Framework and Good Advice" on p.6).

- **Instrument knowledge:** Get to know the "instrument" you're composing for by exploring and experimenting with both your own and other people's voices (e.g. through improvisation). Learn about the voice's limitations and advantages, what it can do in terms of timbre, colour, etc., and vocal technique.
- **Setting the frame:** Set a concrete frame for your composition - give yourself a theme, a poem or a time frame of how long you will spend on it.
- **Arrangement knowledge:** Learn basic skills as a vocal arranger.
- **There is no "right" and "wrong":** You decide, trust yourself.
- **Inspiration from others:** Listen to a lot of different vocal music in many genres, and exchange/co-write in a group with others.
- **Write music for a specific group:** It is helpful to imagine who will sing your work - both in relation to how the "instrument" (choir) sounds and what it can achieve based on its strengths and weaknesses, but also in relation to your motivation as a composer, knowing that the work will be used by a specific group.
- **Various working methods:** Combine the benefits of working using sheet music software with more intuitive approaches (e.g., recording, "by ear", improvising, "jamming", using a loop machine, etc.).
- **Write based on feelings and stories:** Find your own "language" by starting from your own feelings and stories.

Documentation

In addition to the online lectures already described (and documented on video), the teaching material in *The Composing Conductor*, and the students' 10 new choral works, recorded on video/audio at the concert *Human Transformations*, I have given presentations about the entire project on two internal teacher meetings at *The Royal Academy of Music in Aarhus and Aalborg*. I have also given a lecture for *The Innovative Jazz/Pop Choir Directing Symposium 2022* in connection with *Aarhus Vocal Festival 2022*, which took place as hybrid teaching with listeners from all over the world both online and physically present. This postscript and reflection form the final part of the documentation of the whole project.

Conclusion and Perspectives

Collaboration

The project has benefitted from the input of many different collaborators, both internally at *The Royal Academy of Music* (students across various programmes, nationalities, departments and study years as well as teachers) and externally (collaborating choirs/ vocal groups from *Aarhus Music School*, *Aarhus Vocal Festival*, and guest teachers from abroad). It has been fruitful and instructive to get all of these people to contribute with their professional and artistic skills. This collaborative approach is already part of the teaching at *RAMA Vocal Center*, and *The Composing Conductor* has shown that we can make this kind of meaningful exchange take place to an even greater extent - not least by taking creative processes and bringing them to life in the "real world" in the form of concrete words, concerts and teaching in general.

The learning platform Moodle has been an indispensable management tool for me as project manager providing a central place to gather all the information. Most of the student composers chose to work individually, but collaborations also arose between students who had never met each other physically - these groups worked together exclusively online. It would not have been possible to involve so many students across international borders and educational programmes if the project had not taken place via the internet. Similarly, having such simple and flexible access to leaning made it possible for them to participate in the online lectures with the external presenters. Students were able to access the project with minimal preparation required of them, simply gathering to meet up. This exploratory and low-commitment approach to the subject of composing gave the students a good foundation for getting started themselves.

The Students' Commitment

There has been a great interest in participating in the project, and it has been impressive to see how committed the students were in creating their own works. Several of them shared deeply personal stories through their music, even though it may have been the first time they composed. Many of them expressed the importance of having a community and forum where they've received supervision from me as their teacher, and provided peer support of one another. Students also found that having "stepping stones" and milestones along the way (rather than just one big deadline at the end) made the work feel more manageable and achievable. These sub-goals meant that they were able to work step by step and get over the line with their finished works rather than getting overwhelmed by the task. Several students mentioned that this concrete and collaborative approach to the writing process is something they will take with them in the future. The option to take part as a "passive" participant (attending the online lectures but not composing themselves) was taken by 5/17 students due to other work commitments.

Concrete Output: Choral Works and Teaching Material

One goal of the project was that the students' choral works focused specially on the voice, aiming for a very particular *vocal* expression. It has largely succeeded in using the means of the voice (e.g., vocal timbre, text, phrasing, emphases, sounds etc.) as supporting elements for musical features like momentum and "groove", although some students had difficulty implementing these and thought more traditionally in terms of writing vocal arrangements. This approach of writing a song first and then arranging it for voices, while not part of the project's purpose, proved to be a good contrast to some of the more experimental works, where the voice was the starting point for the composition. One approach does not prohibit the other, and actually the presence of both created diversity in the final concert, reflecting individual students; personal forms of expression.

This project has contributed to the further development of the "rhythmic choir" genre creating works with an independent vocal expression, borne out of a creative and personal approach to composition and vocal arranging. Many people - both students and audience - expressed that *Human Transformations* was a very special concert with great artistic integrity, and an important part of *The Aarhus Vocal Festival* with participating choirs and conductors from all over the world.

I hope that the teaching material, like the rest of the project, will inspire choir directors to write their own music. I wanted to focus on the fact that composing does not have to be a lonely, unmanageable process reserved for a lucky few. As such, I've tried to make the teaching material as concrete and simple to use as possible, with a playful and colourful layout. My hope is that it inspires and equips many to become composing choir conductors.

The Composing Conductor

Artistic and Pedagogical Strategies for Creating New, Original, Idiomatic, Choral Works
by Assistant Professor Malene Rigtrup, 2021-22

The goal is, through the exploration of different artistic and pedagogical strategies, to add a creative element to the role of the choir leader by creating new vocal compositions.
The intention is to infuse the genre with even more artistic integrity and create the basis for a new, original and cross-stylistic approach to choral and vocal music.

17 International and Danish Students

from The Royal Academy of Music Aarhus/Aalborg are active co-creators, coming from 5 different educations:

Innovative Choir Leading, RAMA Vocal Center, Aalborg:

- Advanced Postgraduate Diploma
- Master
- Professional Master

- The Songwriting Programme, Aarhus
- General Music Teacher (AM), Aarhus

The project is structured and is mainly taking place online via Moodle, ZOOM and Google Drive

Research and Lectures

The Composing Conductor Online Lectures

Tine Fris / Kristoffer Thorning
Postyr Project, DK
The Postyr Project
Thursday Oct. 28. at 10.30-12.30

Mariou Vriens
Composer, singer, teacher etc., The Netherlands
The Singer's Perspective
Monday Nov. 1st at 9.00-10.30

Bo Gunge
Composer, DK
Artistic Processes and Stage Expression
Thursday Nov. 4. At 13.00-14.00

Anders Edenroth
The Real Group, Sweden
The Voice As The Instrument
Thursday Nov. 18 2021 at 12.00-14.00

Niels Nørgaard
BaSix, DK
Compositions And Creativity In The Vocal Group BaSix
Friday Dec. 3. at 12.00-13.30

Søren Møller
Composer, pianist, lecturer DJM, DK
How To... And Concrete Tools
Friday Dec. 10. at 10.00-12.00

Christian Deichmann
Master Student, The Song Writing Programme, DJM Aarhus, DK
Writing Lyrics
Monday Jan. 10. at 11.00-13.00

New Vocal Compositions

Students compose in groups and individually with shared online supervisions and exchange of experience

Concert: *Human Transformations*
Aarhus Vocal Festival 2022

Digital Educational Material

Creating Vocal Music
- Catalogue of Ideas

Will be published on
www.musikkons.dk
and www.ramavocalcenter.dk

Documentation

Video/audio (concert), report

HUMAN TRANSFORMATIONS

NEW VOCAL MUSIC
written and performed by
international students from
the Royal Academy of Music
Aarhus/Aalborg

Guests:
Maestra, SONO, Airo, Voice Event

Sunday June 5th 2022 at 12.30
Lille Sal, Musikhuset Aarhus

The concert is a part of the research project (FORU) The Composing Conductor by Malene Rigtrup and of Aarhus Vocal Festival

New vocal music composed by students for the concert HUMAN TRANSFORMATIONS

In The Woods by Lilach Krakauer (Israel)
More of Me by Sven Keet (The Netherlands)
Where is the Ground by Susanne van Althuis/Linda Kristenggaard, (The Netherlands/Norway)
Somebody by Julian Knörzer/Marie Elise Møller Foged (Germany/Denmark)
Can You Feel It by Wendy Sergeant (UK)
Can You Hear My Voice by Sebastian Oberlin (Germany)
Let It Go by Tine Fris (Denmark)
Med Brækkede Vinger by Marie Elise Møller Foged/Karen Nice (Denmark)
Vi Vender Tilbage by Margrethe Debel (Denmark)
I Saw It In Your Eyes by Asbjørn Bertheisen (Faroe Islands)

