

On Musical Appropriation, Deconstruction and Re-creation: Olga Neuwirth's *Nomi* pieces

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I.

To talk about the œuvre of Olga Neuwirth, one will necessarily have to refer to practices of quotation, pastiche, mimesis, as well as to crossover, or even masquerade. In any case, the idea of synthesis seems to be a rather frequent or repeated modus in Neuwirth's work. In this particular paper, the focus is put on one of her works which emerges in the field of artistic citation, personal memory and specific crossover procedure; a work that is still rather unique in terms of its thematic spectrum and the way which the composer went about it. Namely, it is a piece that celebrates, that points towards someone, that reveals, that reminds us of one unique individual, a representative of one unique moment in time, of one unique aesthetic and one unique influence that it would later generate. It is a piece dedicated to the memory of Klaus Nomi, a true representative of his time.

Indicatively enough, the work is titled *Hommage à Klaus Nomi*, and was composed in 1998, originally comprising of four songs taken from Klaus Nomi's performing repertory. The four songs collected by Neuwirth's *Hommage* are: *So Simple*, based on Kristian Hoffmann's *Simple Man*; then *Remember*, a rework of a song Nomi titled *Death* (originally *Dido's Lament* from Henry Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas*); *Can't Help It*, inspired by Nomi's *Falling in Love Again*¹, and the last one: *The Witch*, which was made after the song *Ding Dong, The Witch is Dead*, from *The Wizard of Oz*. The *Hommage à Klaus Nomi* was premiered at the Salzburger Festspiele in 1998, and was performed by the Klangforum Wien

1 This song is in fact a combination of two versions of one song; namely, it brings together the songs *Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß auf Liebe eingestellt*, written and composed by Friedrich Hollaender in 1930, and the English-text version *Falling in Love Again (Can't Help It)*, written by Sammy Lerner.

ensemble, together with the countertenors Andrew Watts and Kai Wessel, and with Johannes Kalitzke conducting.

In 2007/08, Neuwirth decided to extend the existing cycle to a total of nine songs and set the entire work up as a songplay for a countertenor and an actor, together with a (spoken) theatrical text by Thomas Jonigk, with Ulrike Ottinger as director. In this further reworked version, Neuwirth chooses to realize the piece with a closer connection to musical theatre. Together with five new songs which were once again taken from Klaus Nomi's performing set, the work now included textual sections.² This production introduces two solo performers, who are both acting as alter egos of Klaus Nomi. Namely, alongside the singer, we now have an actor on the stage as well, one who tells us the story of "himself" – Klaus Nomi; the vocal performer sings the songs, which provide a kind of commentary to the actor's text. Furthermore, in between the songs, Neuwirth decides to imbed instrumental baroque sequences taken from compositions by Bach, Vivaldi, Händel or Telemann, among others, over which the actor Nomi continues with the telling of his life story.

But what is indeed the story of Klaus Nomi, or better said: who in fact was this person? Born as Klaus Sperber (January 24, 1944 – August 6, 1983) in Immenstadt, Bavaria, Klaus Nomi was a German countertenor whose vocal abilities and peculiar stage persona made him a well-known figure among the attendants of the 1980s NYC's West Village scene.

His musical path begins in his early twenties while he was working as an usher at the Deutsche Oper in West Berlin. This was a fertile ground for his teenage musical tastes and one where his tendencies towards opera could catch roots and really develop. According to Nomi himself, he was tormented in having to choose between his love for opera and pop music.³ However, working in the opera house, every opportunity for him to sing and dance was a gift to be wholeheartedly used, at least in the sense of performing in front of his coworkers. Additionally, this was the point in time when he started performing at a gay Berlin discotheque called Kleist Casino, where his genre of choice became operatic arias.

Regardless, according to testimonies of his friends and contemporaries, Nomi also felt as if the socio-cultural state of where he grew up was not really fitting him, or was simply not offering him enough openness that was not contaminated with any sort of restrictions or regulations in the matters of artistic creation.⁴ Therefore, as possibly the utmost logical progression, Klaus Nomi

2 For more detail on the songs see: www.olganeuwirth.com/works.php.

3 <http://brightestyoungthings.com/articles/after-the-fall-remembering-klaus-nomi-30-years-later> (04.05.2018)

4 Ann Magnuson, performance artist and Klaus Nomi's friend, admits: "a lot of us came here to become stars, but on our own terms, on our own turf." *The Nomi Song* (2004) Documentary, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NySeTvdNtEw, 03'30"–03'37" (13.10.2018).

decided to move to New York in the mid-1970s, amidst this specific moment in time when the city was living an economic downturn, with some of the darkest and bleakest years in its history, but a period where many important sociocultural occurrences started coming about. “This was the last period in American culture when the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow still pertained, when writers and painters and theater people still wanted to be (or were willing to be) ‘martyrs to art’.”⁵

In the article called *Why Can't We Stop Talking About New York in the Late 1970s?*, an American novelist and essayist on literary and social topics, Edmund White, describes how the city's limits encapsulated the artistic frenzy of the time. He states how New York City, “while at its worst, was also more democratic: a place and a time in which, rich or poor, you were stuck together in the misery (and the freedom) of the place, where not even money could insulate you”.⁶ It was indeed a city where the New Wave tendencies started taking place, a specific symbiosis of music, performance, film and art, which was a sure reflection of the frenzied times. “It was a time of rebellion, of experimentation and of artistic freedom. New York may have been heading for bankruptcy, but the underground scene didn't let this spoil the mood.”⁷ Over and above, the New York City of that time was really considered to be an oasis of freedom and undisturbed creation, which in the eyes of the artistic thrill-hunters stood as the Promised Land. Maria Popova explains it as the following:

“This notion of the 1970s as having an identity crisis permeated all aspects of culture, from politics to fashion, but something extraordinary was afoot in New York City, a kind of parallel universe of invention and reinvention that not only defined the identity of the decade but also laid the foundation for cultural eras to follow.”⁸

In such a climate, where cultural attainments could be disseminated and bolstered in their growth, aspects of identity inevitably became more and more prominent. A stronger presence and awareness of racial, sexual and gender identities as being the creators and conditioners of our society's everyday, was com-

5 Edmund White, *Why Can't We Stop Talking About New York in the Late 1970s?*, in: *The New York Times*, 10 September 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/09/10/t-magazine/1970s-new-york-history.html (10.05.2018).

6 Ibid.

7 Darja Zub, *New York/New Wave: The Legendary Exhibition at the P.S.1 Opened Up the New York Art Scene of the Young Jean-Michel Basquiat in 1981. The Schirn Has Reconstructed the Arrangement of His Works, True to the Original*, 2018, www.schirn.de/en/magazine/context/new_yorks_new_wave/ (10.05.2018).

8 Maria Popova, *How 1970s New York Shaped Music for Decades to Come*, in: *The Atlantic*, 21 February 2012, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/02/how-1970s-new-york-shaped-music-for-decades-to-come/253394/ (10.05.2018).

ing about, with “the swirl of black, Latin, and gay subcultures [...] at legendary New York dance clubs like the Paradise Garage”. Farber further explains how “[g]ay men of colour ruled that scene, giving that demographic a dominance”.⁹

Consequently, in such 1970s New York City Klaus Nomi could have easily established and developed an artistic notion of himself that he had tentatively started creating in his homeland. According to the data presented in *The Nomi Song*, a 2004 documentary by Andrew Horn, while supporting himself as a pastry chef, Nomi also took singing lessons. During this time he also became more and more involved with the art scene in the East Village, a New York City neighborhood still known today for its “diverse community, vibrant nightlife and artistic sensibility”.¹⁰

The year 1972 marked the very beginning of Klaus Nomi’s international walk of life, as he appeared in a satirical camp production of *Das Rheingold*, at Charles Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theater Company, known for its production of the Theatre of the Ridiculous, a specific theatre genre that emerged in New York City in the 1960s. What ridiculous theatre called together were elements of queer and/or camp performance with the postulates of the experimental theater. Cross-gender casting was rather common; as were non-professional actors, where especially drag queens or various street performers were favored.¹¹ In terms of the content, the plays of the Ridiculous were mostly parodies or adaptations of popular and high culture. In this sense, its subtext was used as agency for social commentary and humor.¹²

With the above mentioned instances, Theatre of the Ridiculous thus became the ignition point in Klaus Nomi’s constitution of the aesthetical, narrative and imaginative landscape from within which he shaped a unique vanguard personality which bundled together the dominant artistic occurrences of New York City of that time. His off-Broadway theater work was principally focused on vaudeville type performances, of principally unrelated acts, brought about through cross-gender casting, and in 1978, one particular performance soared him into the stars. It was his singing of the aria *Mon cœur s’ouvre à ta voix* (*My heart opens to your voice*) from Camille Saint-Saëns’ opera *Samson et Dalila*, which propelled him into the stellar peak of the city’s theatrical camp production. This

9 Jim Farber, What We Can Learn From the Lawless Cool of 70s New York, in: i-D, 29 February 2016, http://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/wj5aqn/what-we-can-learn-from-the-lawless-cool-of-70s-new-york (10.05.2018).

10 www.mas.org/events/walk-with-a-librarian-tompkins-square/ (04.05.2018).

11 Kelly Aliano, Ridiculous Geographies: Mapping the Theatre of the Ridiculous as Radical Aesthetic, doctoral dissertation, Graduate Center, City University of New York 2014, p. 30. http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=http://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1312&context=gc_etds (12.05.2018).

12 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 59ff.

was the performance Nomi's friends and colleagues, as well as Steven Hager, agree was decisive in what the future artistic trajectory of Nomi's would be.¹³ Namely, after that performance, he was invited to perform at clubs all over New York City,¹⁴ and one important shift in Klaus Sperber's life took place at that moment. "People saw him different[ly], or they saw him for the first time, as he became this artificial personality", said Nomi's friend, actress Gabriele Lafari.¹⁵ And that was the moment he chose the name Klaus Nomi for himself, an anagram of the Latin word *omni(s)*, meaning "all, every".

Typically, such psychogeographical effect that New York City indubitably generated, led these artists to somehow gather and interbreed their artistic outputs.¹⁶ In case of Klaus Nomi, this meant becoming a member of the East Village art collective project called The New Wave Vaudeville, "[where] participants sang, acted in skits, and generally embodied the punk and post-punk ethos bubbling up throughout New York at the time".¹⁷

In terms of his performance style, the first element to notice and discuss was surely his peculiar vocal range, which was a combination of a counter tenor – with its soprano range – and a baritone, and he indeed used both, often within one specific song. In general – genre-mixing, combining, borrowing and pastiching were Nomi's principle elements – in terms of both style and repertory. In his later phase, he would wisely use the elasticity of this synth-driven New Wave aesthetic in order to create a performing arena for himself, wherein he would mix pop-rock and opera with the synthesizer soundframe.¹⁸

What he predominantly went with when it comes to repertory were pop covers, and developed a closer artistic collaboration with the singer and song-

13 For more detail see chapter two "New Wave Vaudeville" in: Steven Hager, *Art After Midnight: The East Village Scene*, New York: St. Martin's Press 1986.

14 This particular performance can be found on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=I4sMKzT1uME (12.05.2018).

15 *The Nomi Song* (2004) Documentary, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NySeTvdNtEw, 13'13"-13'28" (13.10.2018).

16 "We were misfits and the only place misfits could go was New York City, and find other misfits." *Ibid.*, 03'08"-03'20".

17 <http://brightestyoungthings.com/articles/after-the-fall-remembering-klaus-nomi-30-years-later> (04.05.2018).

18 To summarize the sound notion of Klaus Nomi's oeuvre, the words of Kembrew McLeod could pinpoint some important components: "Featuring soaring operatic vocals, pumping synthesizers, thumping dance beats and the strangest arrangements you're likely to ever hear, songs such as *Simple Man* are impossible-to-categorize towering monuments of weirdness that lay waste to all other genre-mixers who came before and after him. You haven't lived until you've heard Nomi speak/sing his way (with his thick German accent) through a cover of *The Wizard of Oz's Ding Dong (The Witch is Dead)*, complete with high, piercing female vocals and electronically treated background chants celebrating the death of that aforementioned witch." <http://keepkey.yochanan.net/nomi2.htm> (12.05.2018).

writer, Kristian Hoffmann. As a composer and arranger, Hoffmann is the author of some of Nomi's most popular songs, such as *The Nomi Song* (1981), *Total Eclipse* (1981), *After the Fall* (1982), and *Simple Man* (1982) (also the title song of Nomi's second LP).¹⁹ Finally, this fruitful collaboration was also important in terms of Nomi's ever-growing popularity, which would even exceed the borders of New York City's artistic oasis. As the article on the Brightest Young Things website underlines: "While he was celebrated in art circles in New York, Klaus Nomi would obtain gold-record status in France and start to appear on pop charts throughout Europe in the early 1980s."²⁰

His ascending popularity led to him contributing to David Bowie's *Saturday Night Live* performance in 1979 as a backup singer, a performance that would generate some significant elements for Nomi's stage persona.²¹ That is to say, after the show his plastic tuxedo-lookalike suit became this iconic, quintessential add-on to his performing attire. Namely, Nomi became mesmerized by this avant-garde piece and had one commissioned for himself. Alongside wearing it for the cover of his self-titled album, he also shot some of his videos wearing the same outfit.²² It was a monochromatic black-and-white wide-shouldered tux variant with spandex underneath and with spikey hairdo over a receding hairline; what made his look even more exuberant and lavish was some exaggerated classic Hollywood signature lip contour in dark color. Later on he would add the oversized white gloves, just like the ones the Mickey Mouse character wore, which resulted in a loud visual clash between two different personalities: the dark and gloomy figure against the playful, almost child-like creature with angelic vocal expression.

In the last months prior to his early death, Nomi redirected his focus to operatic music, to Henry Purcell's music mainly, and adopted a more theatrical apparel. It was mostly a variant of the Baroque operatic outfit with the typical ruff collar. The collar also had a role in covering the outbreaks of Kaposi's sarcoma on Nomi's neck, one of the AIDS-related diseases he developed toward the end of his life, which resulted in purple lesions on the skin. Nomi died in 1983 at the age of 39 as a result of complications from AIDS, having been one of the first prominent persons to die of the disease, as AIDS was named and medically identified as such around 1986.²³ The city in which he was (re)born

19 Nomi released three albums, one of which was issued posthumously in 2007.

20 <http://brightestyoungthings.com/articles/after-the-fall-remembering-klaus-nomi-30-years-later> (04.05.2018).

21 What this one-night artistic exchange with David Bowie also brought him was a record deal with Bowie's label RCA.

22 Some of these videos are: *Total Eclipse*, *Lightning Strikes* (1981) and *The Nomi Song*.

23 "It was so new, that it hadn't yet been given a name – other than 'gay cancer'. It wasn't that there was misinformation out there. There was no information. Klaus Nomi had become

became a place of his final rest, with his ashes being scattered by his friends over New York City.

II.

Decisively, what can be said in terms of Olga Neuwirth's authorial approach to the mentioned *Nomi* songs? For this occasion I conducted a small-scale analysis of the 2010 chamber orchestra version, to exemplify what the composer's suppositions and her meta-reading of this pre-existing material resulted in, in terms of both re-viving the character and significance of Klaus Nomi, as well as her setting-out the framework within which this material is generated and, consequently, her creating a new, culturally equally telling work.²⁴

On that account, the first piece of the cycle, the song *Simple Man*, which Neuwirth literally appropriated from Nomi's repertory, could shed some light on one of the angles Neuwirth employed in creating this piece. Namely, the treatment of the material on Neuwirth's part, seems to further amplify the very identity traits Klaus Nomi so carefully cherished – gender ambiguity and the artificiality of expression, in the first line. Stefan Drees has insightfully warned of these two elements in his 2012 article, underlining the importance of the vocal register shifts Nomi employs interchangeably during his performance. The songs are opened with “a fully-toned, sometimes even baritone-colored tenor range, only to be shifted to the countertenor register at certain points, and to then swing up to the highest heights, which not uncommonly, are reached at points of melodic and harmonic peaks [translation MB]”.²⁵ In the original *Simple Man's* refrain, Nomi even went for the multi-track recording, which then delivered both of his registers simultaneously.

one of the first celebrities to die of the disease and no one even knew what was going on.” <http://brightestyoungthings.com/articles/after-the-fall-remembering-klaus-nomi-30-years-later> (04.05.2018).

24 As merely one facet of illustration for the purpose of this analysis, some available YouTube videos could serve well: www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9TPkZQpBOI; www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2ctfocMqHs (16.05.2018).

25 „Wie im Beispiel von *Simple man* beginnt der Sänger viele seiner Titel im Kontrast zu seinem artifiziiellen Äußeren in der volltönenden, manchmal sogar baritonale eingefärbten Tenorlage und lässt diese dann an bestimmten Stellen ins Countertenor-Register umschlagen, um sich dort in höchste Höhen aufzuschwingen, die nicht selten auf melodischen und harmonischen Höhepunkten eines Songs erreicht werden.“ Stefan Drees, *Musikalische Repräsentation des „Anderen“*. Der Countertenor als Klangchiffre für Androgynie und Artifizialität bei Olga Neuwirth, in: Corinna Herr / Arnold Jacobshagen / Kai Wessel (Ed.), *Der Countertenor: Die männliche Falsetstimme vom Mittelalter zur Gegenwart*, Mainz [u. a.]: Schott 2012, p. 251–268, here p. 257.

In resurrecting her Klaus Nomi, Olga Neuwirth respected his vocal architecture, and also adopted the sampling principle, but decided however to introduce the countertenor register even earlier, in the stanza, for example, further intensifying the elements of androgyny, estrangement and artificiality.²⁶

Additionally, her instrumental arrangement also helped in this conceptual transposition. With a typical New Wave instrumental setting, with electric guitar and drums combined with synthesizers, the composer does a specific translocation to this mish-mash space in-between. With a chamber orchestra consisting of flutes, clarinets, trumpets, trombone, violins, cellos and double bass, she combines parts of the synthesizer together with a sampler, and an electric guitar, as well. Interestingly however, she decides to omit the background vocals, as one of the essential elements in the pop music soundscape, and recreates her own notion of Nomi's (pop) universe in a more caricatural way.²⁷ The sound effect, I believe, which is achieved here is rather parodic, as it imitates to a certain extent, but also comments upon the original. However, what Neuwirth does, unlike the Nomi's interpretation, is that she uses the full potential of the 'living instrument'. As Nomi's vocal part has stayed more-or-less untouched, the in-between instrumental episodes are telling some other story, which moves Neuwirth's treatment of the material away from mere appropriation. Her instrumentation is sometimes quite screeching and noisy, and as if it does not mind 'to march to its own drum', literally.

Serving as another reference material in this inquiry, I decided to confront two versions of the song which Klaus Nomi chose from the classical repertory, Henry Purcell's *Dido's Lament*. Once again, in Nomi's case, the vocal part is supported mainly by the arpeggiated harpsichord part as the synthesizer provides the harmonic background with an ostinato pattern and various sound effects. On the other hand, Neuwirth's 'cover of the cover' once again goes a step further. In the act of utmost artistic freedom, the author decided to play with the very framework of the piece itself. Namely, its harmonic tectonics are destabilized and completely called into question. The 'whining' violins sound as if they are performing a lament of their own, while the suspended chords are resolved rather unconventionally, to say the least, repeatedly sounding off-key, and the ultimate pier for all the strands of forces of one musical piece, the final tonic – is here a dissolved landscape of the evaporating sounding.

The author is deliberately playing with the musical setting of both pop songs, as well as the classical repertory, with the affected and the frighteningly pompous ritornellos, and the orchestra of dead players, adding another layer

26 See: *ibid.*, p. 259ff.

27 Such approach is evident in her uninterrupted use of *glissandi*, for example, in the *Simple Man* stanzas.

of re-interpretation. But, what is important, is – the figure, or, better said, the vocal character of Klaus Nomi – stays the same. He becomes this temporally and historically transgressive figure, an immortal symbol of individualism, freedom and performative act as the living path, while everything else around him changes or dies. The piece was read by the critics as being an eclectic attempt to fight for the re-acknowledgment of Nomi as a vanguard figure of even the contemporary pop culture, but even more, as a strong statement against stylistic purity as the utmost ideal in the realm of classical music.²⁸

Gerold Gruber points out in his review of the premiere how the *Nomi* pieces are in fact a paraphrase, as Neuwirth deals, for the first time, with musical adaptation of some sort. On the one hand, it is a work that conveys the issues of “polystylism”, but on the other, it profoundly shakes up some “narrow-minded” aesthetical postulates, as he explains.²⁹ These pieces embody a specific language of irony and overturn. “An overturn of the stylistic one-wayness” [translation MB], is how Gruber puts it.³⁰ In this sense he also believes that Olga Neuwirth is close to the experimental ways of art of the 1960s and 1970s, and fortunately fills those shoes after a long hiatus of anything similarly audacious in regards to ‘serious’ art. Therefore, in the *Nomi* pieces “the known sound situations are deformed and developed into nervous sounding complexes [translation MB]”.³¹ But this ‘musical countdown to death’ – since the narrative itself spreads from Nomi telling us about his childhood and his identity, to his success and premature death (towards the end, the orchestra plays *Requiem* for Nomi) – tells a

28 See: Paul Kilbey, *Knowing Nomi, Knowing Olga Neuwirth: ‘In Portrait’* with London Sinfonietta, 2012, <http://bachtrack.com/review-london-sinfonietta-in-portrait-olga-neuwirth>; Bernhard Günther, *Hommage à Klaus Nomi. Zu Olga Neuwirth’s Zyklus*, in: Berno Odo Polzer / Thomas Schäfer (Ed.), *Katalog Wien Modern 2004*, Saarbrücken: Pfau 2004, p. 91–93; Gerold Gruber, *Olga Neuwirth: Hommage à Klaus Nomi*, in: *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift* 53 (1998), H. 7/8, p. 70–71.

29 Gruber, fn. 28, p. 70.

30 „[...] deren ironische Facette die Farce der Stil-Einbahnen entlarvt.“ *ibid.*

31 „Bekannte Klangsituationen werden verformt und entwickeln sich zu nervösen Klangkomplexen.“ Steffen Kühn, *The Nomi Opera?*, 2008, www.leipzig-almanach.de/musik_the_nomi_opera_-_olga_neuwirth_zur_maerzmusik_2008_steffen_kuehn.html (18.05.2018).

Similar understanding of Neuwirth’s authorial signature was delivered by Stefan Drees: “Many tiny events culminate in turbulent sound units and nervous, glimmering textures that are constantly changing shape and volume. [...] The confusing effect of Olga Neuwirth’s works is founded on shiftings and deformations. Deviations from a norm considered traditional are a means for the composer to develop the elements of an intensely personal musical language. This begins with the very specific use of spatially deformed sounds and the manipulation of instrumental sound.” Stefan Drees, *Equivalencies, shiftings and fractures. Notes on the music of Olga Neuwirth*, www.boosey.com/downloads/NeuwirthWVZ2010.pdf (12.05.2018), p. 8.

story not only about the protagonist, but also points to particularities of Neuwirth's writing and its poetical and aesthetical viewpoints. In connection to the points earlier presented, I extracted five aspects to discuss in regards to Olga Neuwirth's approach to the figure and work of Klaus Nomi: identification, appropriation, deconstruction, reinvention and the aspect of homage.

The facet of **identification** was for Olga Neuwirth undoubtedly important in creating this work. "Since the age of 12, his songs have been following me", the composer confesses.³² She later on also explained, saying "when I heard Klaus Nomi on an LP in 1982 for the first time, I immediately felt close to him. The musical impetus came from New York's punk and no wave scene, which I admired so much."³³ In explaining what moved her especially close to Nomi was a similar tendency to pastiche, irony, Dadaist practices and dramatic combination of classical and pop. And in her œuvre, Neuwirth expressed affinity to androgynous vocal register even before writing the *Nomi* pieces.³⁴ To continue, what Klaus Nomi offered to the world was this "exhilarating prospect of total freedom – freedom to build one's own identity independently of any models or of any preexisting normative identities".³⁵

In the musical sense Olga Neuwirth is no less brave; her creative position is assuredly a transgressive one. As she is willingly overstepping those narrow-minded boundaries of the prescribed creative principle, the artistic extremes are brought together at once.³⁶ Further, Nomi was an embodiment of this grandiloquent amalgam of high and low, of artificial and tentatively natu-

32 Günther, fn. 28, p. 92.

33 <http://van-us.atavist.com/playlist-neuwirth> (16.05.2018).

34 "The composer herself described her efforts in this regard at the beginning of the 1990s as a quest for 'the manufacture of hypersounds', and for 'the generation of androgynous sounds', referring to a process of flexibly wielded amalgams of different sources of sonority [...]" Stefan Drees, *Artificiality as an Aesthetic Principle: Some Basic Reflections on the Work of Olga Neuwirth*, in: Lucerne Festival, Roche (Ed.), *Olga Neuwirth – 2016*, Basel: Roche 2016, p. 97–115, here p. 109.

For example, in her two works composed before the *Nomi* pieces Neuwirth reached out for the countertenor part; these are *Five Daily Miniatures* (1994) and *La vie ... ulcérant(e)* (1995). For more detail see: www.olganeuwirth.com/works.php.

35 Žarko Cvejić, "Do You Nomi?" Klaus Nomi and the Politics of (Non)identification, in: *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 13 (2009), p. 66–75, here p. 66.

36 The composer herself discloses on her authorial approach, by stating that the *Nomi* pieces "[s]hould not be like a revival attempt of an icon, which – although ethically considered – is honorable, but artistically rather a risk [translation MB]". („Soll nicht wie ein Wiederbelebungsversuch einer Ikone sein, der zwar – ethisch betrachtet – ehrenwert ist, aber künstlerisch eher ein Risiko bedeutet.") Olga Neuwirth, *Gedankenskizzen zum Projekt Hommage à Klaus Nomi – a songplay in nine fits* [New York, März 2007], in: Stefan Drees (Ed.), *Olga Neuwirth. Zwischen den Stühlen. A Twilight Song auf der Suche nach dem fernen Klang*, Salzburg: Verlag Anton Pustet 2008, p. 349–353, here p. 349.

ral, of high-tech and avant-garde vs. corporeal, mundane and traditional, and as Žarko Cvejić points out – he embodied this mixture of both “fascination and anxiety” for the one who was to watch or listen to him, just as Olga Neuwirth’s procedure suggests, likewise.³⁷

Nevertheless, where do these ‘strange’ and ‘unearthly’ notions in fact come from? Since, in both Nomi’s and Neuwirth’s case, none of these elements themselves were really new or original: “Nomi’s audiences clearly recognized all of them as stylistic (and stylized) borrowings.”³⁸ In a similar manner, Olga Neuwirth’s authorial gesture is also a “stylistic and stylized borrowing”, but her interventions into the already existing musical tissue, as, once again – a cover of a cover – with its audibly peculiar slips and rather obvious allusions to the life ‘beyond’, rather loudly imply the ‘otherworldly’.

Another element employed in Olga Neuwirth’s *Nomi* work is the element of **appropriation**, a word which, in the artistic and cultural sense, implies many often contradictory positions, but will generally suggest “taking something and making or claiming it as one’s own, or using it as if it was one’s own”,³⁹ generally in the artistic or at least, cultural sense.

Still, in the Nomi-Neuwirth case this causality is not so straightforward. Namely, even though Neuwirth’s work is her own artistic creation, with all its associated rights, this appropriation element becomes fairly multifaceted. Neuwirth, particularly, does not omit the real author in any possible sense (in case we consider Nomi to occupy this grandiose realm of ‘the author’), quite the contrary, the body itself embodies the author, reclaiming his own authorial position.

The next element which arose in this comparative study is that of **deconstruction**. In this work the deconstructive aspect becomes perhaps conceptually ‘the loudest’. The composer dissects not only Nomi’s vision of those specific songs, in both an aesthetical and conceptual way, but her intervention crosscuts the whole historically and stylistically conceived trajectory of music of the West and our notions of these narratives, of what ‘the real’ Baroque sound should sound like, or what the performing instances should entail, or what in fact ‘a serious’ classical music performance calls for. Olga Neuwirth builds her creative space around the principle of deconstruction rather prominently, deliberately playing with those notions and ring a specific ‘knowingness’ and familiarity.⁴⁰ As Edward Campbell indicates: “she states that her interest lies in

37 Cvejić, fn. 35, p. 67.

38 Ibid., p. 70.

39 Marcus Boon, *On Appropriation*, in: *The New Centennial Review* 7/1 (2007), p. 1–14, here p. 2.

40 In describing Olga Neuwirth’s work *Lost Highway*, the booklet text claims: “The search for landmarks goes nowhere. Behind the dense abundance of sound patterns hides a systematic

the deconstruction of ‘images and sounds/music by means of a discourse about perception, as a way of showing that there are images and sounds that work according to a certain logic, and can also be manipulated’.⁴¹ When these vistas are employed in the *Nomi* pieces, such procedures become most obvious in Neuwirth’s deconstruction principle of the baroque harmonic postulates and instrumentation.

Finally, by employing her personal, as well as the collective, generational memory, Neuwirth revives and **reinvents** her childhood hero. She gives him some new and different visual components, but with the focal point remaining the same. In the end, the songs themselves, or these ‘covers of the covers’ become almost irrelevant. The reworked material becomes a byproduct in the composer’s aim to reinvent or to relive one persona.

This brings me to the very last aspect, of course, that of **homage**, evident from the title alone. What is, in fact, the idea of homage, in itself? – It presumes the idea of continuation and resumption, of celebration and of an uninterrupted course of one’s path. In Neuwirth’s piece Klaus Nomi is not only honored, but he continues to live. In one of the textual sequences of the *Hommage*, the actor Nomi transcends his own death and comments on his life, on his work, on his death, and on his self-notion, from a position of immortality, claiming how he “never disappears”. And this idea of continuation took place in the composing process of Olga Neuwirth’s, too, coming back in four more transfigurations and redos after the initial 1998 concept.⁴²

deconstruction of acoustic everyday experiences [translation MB].” („Die Suche nach Orientierungspunkten läuft ins Leere. Hinter der dicht gedrängten Fülle von Klangmustern verbirgt sich eine systematische Dekonstruktion akustischer Alltagserfahrungen.“) www.graz03.at/servlet/sls/Tornado/web/2003/content/3007E171F65170A7C1256D48003E2907 (24.10.2018).

41 Edward Campbell, *Music after Deleuze*, London [u. a.]: Bloomsbury 2013 (Deleuze Encounters), p. 60.

42 Other than the 2007/08 songplay version, an adaptation without the spoken text (and without the actor) was later introduced, alongside a video by the video artist Lillevan. A third version was inaugurated in 2011, when Neuwirth presented the work together with another piece for piano solo (*Kloing!*), calling this composite “A music-theatrical evening assembled and staged by Olga Neuwirth”, and linking the two with a short intertext by Elfriede Jelinek (written for that occasion). Finally, the fourth resurrection of the original piece takes a form of a chamber orchestra version with the soloist, containing all nine songs and serving as a kind of enhanced concert version of the songplay; the piece now mostly takes on this form of the repertoire living (for more detail see: www.olganeuwirth.com/works.php, <http://www.olganeuwirth.com/projects.php>).

As some of these different approaches Neuwirth has taken on over a 20-year time period have kindly been brought to my attention by a colleague, I must forewarn about the important aspect of shift (and subsequently vanishing) of the performing subject, namely, Klaus Nomi. As Neuwirth omitted the spoken text and the actor, a specific identity rift took place,

Finally, it is important to notice that Klaus Nomi and Olga Newirth also share a similar authorial standpoint, with their artistic endeavors appropriating a particular ductus, translating it to their artistic and socio-cultural conditionality, and taking it somewhere else.

“[T]he appropriations and resignifications of musics by urban subcultures themselves embody their own complex and often internally contradictory senses of symbol and simulacrum. These expressive works at once celebrate meaning and meaninglessness, play and nostalgia, pathos and jouissance, in a synthesis that goes much deeper than the paradigmatic dualities of ‘tradition and innovation’, or ‘commercialism and authenticity’.”⁴³

In conclusion, the same could be said for Olga Newirth’s undertakings, with the fusing of many different sound components, paired with some impossible-to-classify genre traits. Such approach takes us much farther than the mere artistic eclecticism or heterogeneity. Such approach directs us towards something which Bernhard Günther described altogether adequately:

“Signs of a generation change in contemporary music – this is not infrequently mentioned in connection to Olga Newirth – but what this underlines even more is this: traditional dividing lines and taboos are [hereby] playfully forgotten. That a strange pioneer of pop culture suddenly [‘slips’] into a concert with music by Olga Newirth, not only gives us an insight into the collection of records of the young composer, but also shows that it is time, for those solidified stereotypes of ‘new music’ to undergo a revision [translation MB].”⁴⁴

summing up the real, biographically constituted persona of Nomi and the meta-embodiment of him: the one who speaks through the lyrics of the songs about Nomi himself. Additionally, in this version the video materials took on a more active, metaphorical role, which nowadays, as the *Hommage* is almost exclusively being performed in a concert adaptation, is annulled, as well. Therefore, bringing closer together these different versions of the *Nomi* pieces and the question of the (performing) subject I strongly believe will provide further new angles to the parameters set in this analysis: that of *identification, appropriation, deconstruction, reinvention and homage*.

43 Peter Manuel, Music as Symbol, Music as Simulacrum: Postmodern, Pre-Modern, and Modern Aesthetics in Subcultural Popular Musics, in: *Popular Music* 14/2 (1995), p. 227–239, here p. 228f.

44 „Anzeichen eines Generationenwechsels in der zeitgenössischen Musik – davon ist gerade im Zusammenhang mit Olga Newirth nicht selten die Rede – ist wohl vor allem dies: Überlieferte Trennlinien und Tabus geraten spielerisch in Vergessenheit. Dass ein seltsamer Pionier der Popkultur unversehens in ein Konzert mit Musik von Olga Newirth gerät, gibt nicht nur Einblick in die Plattensammlung einer jungen Komponistin, sondern zeigt auch, dass es längst an der Zeit ist, erstarrte Klischeebilder von ‚Neuer Musik‘ einer Revision zu unterziehen.“ Günther, fn. 28, p. 92.