

## PULSE

PULSE is a continual work-in-progress that will evolve with me as I perform, create, collaborate, and research in the near and distant future. The idea for this project has emerged from the intersection of numerous interests, experiences, and events related to my personal life and artistic practice.

My central exploration continues to be transdisciplinarity in the fields of opera and music theatre. This has been a primary interest for over a decade and led me (in the midst of an active career as a professional singer) to pursue postgraduate studies in contemporary dance choreography (at PARTS in Brussels, Belgium) and artistic research (at Middlesex University and the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Toronto). My research is focused on performing and training practices relevant to transdisciplinary contexts in the performing arts. It aims to support professional artists and students interested in cultivating their own 'integrative performing practices' and my primary case study (amongst many others) is my personal artistic practice.

From my perspective, transdisciplinary work in the performing arts faces two principal challenges. The first is related to the actual 'doing' of what I call 'integrative music theatre', a genre that aspires to exist between, across, and beyond the performing arts disciplines of music, dance, and theatre. This relates generally to questions of 'know-how' and specifically to the ability of performers to consolidate disciplinary-specific techniques or develop new integrative ones (or both). The second challenge (assuming we have had some degree of success dealing with the first) is cultivating performance conditions that permit transdisciplinary performing and expression to be received on their own terms. This is no small task, and of essential importance for transdisciplinary work to be appreciated and criticized beyond the limits of traditional disciplinary aesthetics.

I have discovered a key to facing the first challenge is a somatic approach to technique that heightens awareness of the profound interdependence of breathing, moving, and voicing. This foundation facilitates an embodied assessment and integration of diverse techniques in performers and encourages the cultivation of a performing state that does not rely on multitasking. I believe this foundation of somatic awareness can also be helpful in developing a more engaged and empathic audience for transdisciplinary work. For this reason, I seek to develop performances rooted in shared embodied experiences that serve as an entry point that unites performers and audience. PULSE uses the heartbeat and breath, and how they exist in tandem, as this point of entry.

PULSE also integrates other personal and practical interests alongside my broader research into integrative music theatre training and performing. A few years ago I discovered Capestrano – a small village in Abruzzo, Italy where I currently live. This place has heightened my desire for a deeper connection with community and to explore the possibilities of harmonizing my day-to-day living with my artistic interests in the wider world. In 2009 this area was devastated by an earthquake which severely damaged numerous villages. Restoration of these is ongoing, but in the past few years, several of the area's historic churches have reopened. With PULSE, I hope to connect with local communities through singing and dancing in these revived spaces and interweaving themes of hope and recovery in troubling times. These goals exist alongside the practical necessity for a production with minimal technical requirements and limited financial support.

The production is structured around the concept and experience of pulse in music and everyday living. In music, ‘pulse’ usually refers to a regular beat felt as the basis for rhythm and ensemble between and in performers. Although its principles can be associated with most music, it is frequently associated with early music (like Byrd’s motet, see below) before the existence of metronomes or conductors. Moreover, the regularity of this beating is often related to the pulse of the human heart at rest (that is, like the modern clock, around once every second). The performance will play with this foundation of an ever-continuing beating in relation to my own changing pulse rate as I dance (accelerating), sing (decelerating), dance and sing together (accelerating), and stand or walk in silence (decelerating).

Ne irascaris Domine satis, et ne ultra memineris iniquitatis nostrae. Ecce respice populus tuus omnes nos.	Be not angry, O Lord, and remember our iniquity no more. Behold, we are all your people.
Civitas sancti tui facta est deserta. Sion deserta facta est, Jerusalem desolata est.	Your holy city has become deserted. Zion has become deserted, Jerusalem has been made desolate.

I have already mentioned the theme of destruction and recovery, and to underline this I have decided to draw on the music and text of a two-part motet by the English composer William Byrd (c.1540-1623). Byrd’s motet is relevant to this project in many ways. Byrd was a devout Catholic (like many of the residents in Abruzzo) living and working in Protestant England. The text of this motet is often thought to reflect Byrd’s own feelings of helplessness in this predicament and alluding to the effects of losing one’s faith. These themes have both literal and metaphorical resonances with today. For example, when I first arrived in Abruzzo, many villages were literally deserted as huge sections of towns and cities were still too unsafe to inhabit after the earthquake. I also sense that COVID-19 has dismantled many social ‘cities’ (including the performing arts community) through forced isolation and social distancing. Are these events happening for a reason? Is God, mother nature, or our collective psyche trying to tell us something? Amidst such difficult questions and situations, PULSE (like Byrd’s beautiful musical setting) aspires to promote hope through art and the beauty of the integrated singing voice and dancing body.

Thinking of PULSE in the broader context of my current work and research in transdisciplinary practices, I hope it points to new directions for the performing arts, specifically from the point of view of arts pedagogy and creative practice. PULSE will serve to highlight how my ongoing research can be applied to current work in the industry. At the same time PULSE is responding to the current situation of performing artists who must continually adapt their work to unknown and ever-changing circumstances if they hope to perform for live audiences again. My intention is to develop PULSE as a ‘pop-up’ performance that only requires an even floor space of 35m<sup>2</sup> (the same space as the only studio I have been able to work in over the past year because of COVID-19). It will be a live installation of variable length (the performance will be designed as a loop that can continue as long as I have the endurance to perform). Importantly, it will also give agency to audiences to choose their performance experience – up close, from a distance, in stillness, in movement, for a few minutes or an hour, etc. – and also acknowledging the possibility for audience members to maintain social distancing if they so choose. The video made for the Watershed Festival (see below) would also become a virtual option for audience engagement and serve as a way to share the work internationally.

### An unexpected premiere

A Call for Proposals from the Watershed Festival for their 'New Works Showcase' at the end of 2020 felt opportune considering that live performances (even if socially distanced) still felt a long way off. Originally conceived as a 'work-in-progress' documentation of a future live performance, the video production gradually morphed into a performance project of its own.

One disadvantage of creating the video is that many of the 'essential' components of the live performance have been lost. Aside from the absence of *actual* liveness, there is the absence of *actual* bodies (mine and audience) in a relationship in a shared space. As a result, the 'lived experience' of my accelerating and decelerating heart rate is significantly reduced. The envisioned space itself is also missing, as I was unable to make the video in a restored church in my region. Perhaps most significantly for me, in the video the cyclical structure I feel is central is replaced by a linear one, and the large section of improvised singing and dancing becomes 'fixed'. However, the medium of film also has its benefits, and in many respects, these have balanced what I feel was lost with what could never have otherwise been.

The opening walking section to the heartbeat track is very much what I imagined in my movements (walking in this regular rhythm), even though its purpose (to mark and explore my performance 'territory') is largely lost. I cut out a large section of what I call the 'walking loop', as the priority for the film became an introduction to the beautiful nature of Abruzzo in its stark contrast to the destruction caused by the 2009 earthquake. Parts of this video might 'read' like promotional material for *Abruzzo Turismo*, and I would feel wonderful if it inspires and visitors to visit the region.

It was important for me to show most of the choreographed section ('Ne irascaris') in the same studio in which I developed it and that has determined the size of the future performance space. My process for developing that choreography largely involved the piecing together of improvised sections in connection with one of the voice parts I sing in the motet. The audio track of this section was compiled from separate recordings made by each singer to a 'click track' and in relation to whichever voice(s) were recorded previously. Often multiple takes/sessions were required to get everything to fit, and we all learned that Renaissance polyphony is even harder to 'get right' when you are not in the same country.

My original idea for the third section was to have a video of me recording my singing in the yet-to-be-restored church of Capestrano's main piazza (the first-seen images of the church in scaffolding with the 'L'Aquila' sign). However, it is still a construction site so gaining access was not possible. There was, however, an opportunity to take some photos of the yet-to-be-restored church in Capestrano's historical centre. Because of this, I chose to limit this whole section to still photos (the opening photo is an early-morning view from my front door). The melodies of this section are extracted from Byrd's motet and sung to (overlapping) chords more or less extracted from the motet itself.

Toward the end of the video production period, I discovered an abandoned village that gave me a lot of inspiration. In particular, it offered the possibility of actually dancing in a church space. Future live performances of PULSE will involve combined singing-dancing improvisations over Alex Rosen's composition but, for the video, the creative process was largely turned upside down as I lacked the technology (a wireless microphone) to simultaneously record my singing and dancing together. This technical limitation was compounded by the fact that the composition had yet to be completed. My

first step was to record several dance improvisations from different angles in the church. I subsequently pieced excerpts of these together into a logical choreography of about 5 minutes. After I received the sound file from Alex I made adjustments to the film and shared the results for feedback (with my feedback to him for the sound file). I then recorded three vocal improvisations and asked Alex to make a selection of which excerpts he thought went best with his composition. In this process he asked for an audio extract of the video, so he could coordinate his selection of the singing with the sounds of breathing and feet moving in the video file. He sent me back the vocal file and I then (very surprisingly) only had to make one small adjustment to 'fit' the sung voice with the dancing body.

### **Credits**

'Ne irascaris Domine'

William Byrd (c. 1540-1623) (composition)

Griet De Geyter (soprano)

Kevin Skelton (tenor/dance)

Gunther Vandeven (baritone)

Alex Rosen (bass)

'Deserta'

Alex Rosen (composition, audio editing)

Kevin Skelton (vocal/dance improvisations)

Kevin Skelton (concept, choreography, direction)

Gunther Vandeven (outside eyes and ears)

Mirek Góreczny (image assistant)

## Kevin Skelton & ātmā music theatre

**Kevin Skelton** has a multifaceted career as a performer, director, choreographer, teacher, and scholar. Equally at home on the concert and operatic stage, Kevin specializes in seventeenth-century music, the Bach Evangelist roles, and experimental music theatre. Kevin has performed with some of the world's finest early music ensembles including Collegium Vocale Gent, L'Arpeggiata, and Concerto Palatino and in numerous theatres and festivals throughout the world including Teatro La Fenice, La Monnaie, Aix-en-Provence, Opéra Royal de Versailles, and the early music festivals in Boston and Utrecht.

In recent years Kevin has focused on exploring the possibilities of integrating the performing arts. His unique facility combining voice and movement has been showcased in productions of Opera Atelier (Canada), Boston Early Music Festival (USA), the Netherlands Reisopera, Veenfabriek (Netherlands), Silbersee (Netherlands), Sasha Waltz & Guests (Germany), Dance Company Nanine Linning (Germany), SPAC (Japan), Company Derashinera (Japan), and the Dutch breakdance company ISH. Kevin has produced numerous videos and live performances under the auspices of his own company [ātmā](#) having performed at the Operadagen Rotterdam, Theater aan het Vrijthof in Maastricht, and Festival Les Nuits de Septembre (Festival de Wallonie). Kevin is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto researching new performing practices applicable to the training, creation, direction, and performing of integrative music theatre. He has led workshops in integrative performing training around the world including the contemporary dance school PARTS, the Centre for Opera Studies in Italy, and the Shizuoka Performing Arts Centre in Japan.

**ātmā** elevates the possibilities of musical and physical expression to new heights through a commitment to the exploration and presentation of integrative music theatre. In this genre the boundaries of music, dance, and theatre blur, diminish, or even cease to exist. Integrative performers are challenged to communicate in unfamiliar and foreign artistic languages, while at the same time forced to reconsider their own specializations through different expressive lenses. As diverse individuals unite, new contexts are created to reinvent music theatre exploration, creation, and performance.

Since 2010 ātmā has created several videos and four live performances. [Sol io](#) and [The Daily Routine](#) both premiered in 2012 with performances at the Operadagen Rotterdam and Theater aan het Vrijthof in Maastricht (Netherlands). [Divine Rapture](#), a production based on the Song of Songs, premiered as the opening of the Festival Les Nuits de Septembre (Festival de Wallonie) in the autumn of 2013, and most recently [To be determined](#) was presented at the Feniks Festival as the culmination of an experimental music theatre residency hosted by [deFeniks](#) (Mortsel, Belgium). ātmā has also been in residence at [wpZimmer](#) (Antwerp), [deBijloke](#) (Gent), and at [FLUX Laboratory](#) (Geneva) where work started on a new production [Gameplay](#).