

# The New York Times

## [Secrets Found Online, Shared Softly](#)

by William Robin

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Opera and technology have long had an uneasy relationship. The one has always required the other — from the Baroque spectacle of 17th-century operas, with their deus-ex-machina gimmickry, to the stagecraft required to mount any contemporary production of Wagner’s “Ring” cycle.

Historically, though, opera tended to avoid confronting the technological head-on.

Composers stuck to timeworn subjects from literature, myth or history. Machines controlled the staging; they didn’t usually appear onstage.

But we live with a different set of myths today, and contemporary opera has begun to reflect the age of Mark Zuckerberg and Edward Snowden. Thus, Nico Muhly’s “Two Boys,” a story of intrigue and murder in online chat rooms, which will arrive at the Metropolitan Opera in October; and Tod Machover’s 2010 “Death and the Powers,” a “robot pageant” featuring animatronic sets and a wealthy industrialist who downloads his own consciousness. And in David Lang’s “whisper opera” — which will have its New York premiere on Saturday at the Clark Studio Theater at Lincoln Center — the Internet takes center stage.

Online communication forms the backbone of “the whisper opera,” which will run through Aug. 13 as part of the Mostly Mozart Festival. Mr. Lang, a Pulitzer Prize-winning composer and a founder of the Bang on a Can new-music collective, has created a libretto out of what he calls Internet secrets. He typed short, personal phrases like “When I think of you I think of” into a search engine and cataloged the results. The opera consists of these poignant aphorisms, made anonymous by the omission of sources. A kind of one-man version of the Prism project, Mr. Lang trolls Internet data for clandestine truths.

“It is about the difference between our live persons and our hidden persons,” Mr. Lang





said in a recent phone interview. Invoking Mr. Snowden, the composer noted the paradox between recent anger over government surveillance and the willingness of consumers to give information to advertisers. “There are things that we’re happy to reveal about ourselves through our corporate purchases or through our chat rooms, or through our political speech,

or through all sorts of incredible communications that we make” through the Internet, he added. “And yet live, we would never say these things.”

Except in Mr. Lang’s opera, in which they are whispered by the soprano Tony Arnold as well as four instrumentalists from the International Contemporary Ensemble, who will also perform the composer’s hushed music. Removed from their original context, lines like “It’s not my fault that I am so pretty” recall the plaintive, mesmerizing repetition of Mr. Lang’s recent works, like “The Little Match Girl Passion,” a reinterpretation of Bach and Hans Christian Andersen; “Death Speaks,” a song cycle deconstructing Schubert lieder; and “love fail,” a meditation on the tale of Tristan and Isolde.

In drawing on Internet secrets, Mr. Lang illuminates the contradictions in modern life, the contrasts drawn between what we reveal in heated comment threads and what we conceal in the real world. “When we go search something on the Internet,” and then suddenly “ads for it show up for the rest of the year — whatever site we visit — we don’t have any problem with this,” he said. “And yet if there were a marketer calling us every day, if there was a human part of this, we would be very upset.”

The Internet has lately been of particular interest to Mr. Lang. In 2011, he hosted a crowd-sourced competition in which musicians could submit YouTube videos of their renditions of one of his piano pieces. For “Death Speaks,” he used the Internet to browse through hundreds of Schubert songs for mentions of death, and constructed his text out of them. The “whisper opera” libretto presents prosaic, personal thoughts gathered from sources like Twitter feeds and Tumblr posts. Googling selections from the text reveals some lines to be less secret than Mr. Lang may have intended. One search led to a Miley Cyrus song, another to the memoirs of Representative Charles B. Rangel.

Mr. Lang’s use of technology as a symbol of modernity does have an operatic precedent. In the 1920s, composers like Weill, Hindemith and Krenek wrote *Zeitoper* —

German for “opera of the time” — set in factories and nightclubs and filled with newfangled devices like telephones and record players.

Most emblematic was Max Brand’s “Maschinist Hopkins,” summarized by the author Nicolas Slonimsky: “A cuckolding libertine pushes the husband of his mistress to his death in the cogs of a monstrous machine and strangles her when he finds out that she has become a promiscuous prostitute, whereupon the foreman, Maschinist Hopkins, dismisses him from his job ostensibly for inefficiency.”

“Hopkins,” an operatic parallel to Fritz Lang’s “Metropolis,” depicted the technological wonders of the factory, equating its switchboards with temple altars. Similarly, Krenek’s “Jonny Spielt Auf” (“Jonny Strikes Up”) featured a telephone, film projections and even a moving train. In *Zeitoper*, these novelties represented the depersonalization of the Jazz Age. One critic wrote of Krenek’s opera that it “embodied our technical era of the machine.”

Later in life, Krenek expressed ambivalence about the marvels he had introduced to opera, calling them “not really miracles, but just perfectly ordinary objects from everyday life.” Mr. Lang’s Internet secrets are similarly commonplace, but serve a different purpose. Rather than use technology to symbolize dehumanization, he finds the deeply personal in the anonymous Google search. Both *Zeitoper* and “the whisper opera” elevate the mundanely modern to the exalted sphere of opera. But Mr. Lang’s work speaks less to an era of the machine than to our era of Facebook sharing.

This humanization figured into Mr. Lang’s stringent restrictions on the opera’s performance. The audience will not be given a libretto or surtitles; seating is limited to 40 each performance; and audio or video recording is forbidden.

“If we’re going to keep live performance at the center of our activity, maybe we are going to have to restrict live performance to things that can only happen in front of us live,” Mr. Lang said. “I’ve been trying to think of things that will only happen live, the things that can’t be recorded.”

The particularly soft musical language that Mr. Lang has fashioned means that no audience member can hear the entire opera; each encounter is unique, and can only be experienced live. “With this piece, I had the idea of making something out of the sounds that are so fragile, and the information that is so quiet, that you wouldn’t be able to record it,” Mr. Lang said. “You would just have to be there.”

This approach seems to address the anxieties that some carry about technology’s recent intrusions into opera: two decades ago, the fierce debates over surtitles; today, worries about amplification and the potentially pernicious effects of HD broadcasts. Some reviewers who criticized the Met’s new “Ring” cited its overreliance on a multimillion-dollar stage machine that sacrificed drama for spectacle (when it worked).

Mr. Lang's "whisper opera" is both high- and low-tech — an unamplified, unmediated presentation of the online world. In the production, directed by Jim Findlay, the musicians will move throughout the theater, playing and speaking so softly that each listener can only capture a sliver of the work. "No one hears the same piece, because the things which are presented are so quiet," Mr. Lang said, "that what actually comes "into focus in front of you is very different from what comes into focus in front of somebody else."

Finding a musical style to accompany whispers was a difficult process for Mr. Lang. One counterpart might be the frail music of Salvatore Sciarrino, the Italian composer who uses extended instrumental techniques to create delicate sounds that often stay at the pianissimo level. Mr. Lang asked the musicians of the International Contemporary Ensemble to play every quiet effect they could on their instruments. "I have this long catalog of all of these incredible things," he said, laughing. "There was one great moment where the cellist was biting the strings."

But Mr. Lang ultimately rejected the Sciarrino approach in favor of a more conventional method of producing quiet sounds: playing normally but at a very soft volume. "I didn't want it to be an unusual thing that by its nature is quiet," he said. "I wanted it to be something which could be loud but with great effort was made silent." This approach enhances the fragility — as well as the risk factor — of the live performance and helps elucidate the libretto's mysteries. The effect, for Mr. Lang, was the idea that "this is something I could shout, but I'm not going to shout it."

Krenek preferred to shout out his music's modernity. In its original production, "Jonny" ended with its title character — a black jazz fiddler who teaches the uptight European world how to fox trot — playing atop a spinning globe. The globe came to a stop, revealing itself to be a record inscribed, "Jonny spielt auf: Ernst Krenek, Opus 45."

The unrecordable "whisper opera" points to a quieter vision of contemporary life, Mr. Lang said: "It's about a kind of catalog of all of these conversations which are murmuring around us all the time."