Voicing Stigma in Performances:
An Account of *Mad:Ness* (2023)

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Fig. 1. Nat Jobbins and Lea Luka Sikau in front of an oversized copy of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, *exposed by projection imagery. All images were taken during rehearsals at the performance space TONALi in Hamburg in March 2023.*

> *Illnesses have names that do violence.*
> *Hearing them spoken tears the air,*
> *rupturing your sense of place, when in your life you are.*
> *Seeing them written breaks with your alphabet: these are not letters but*
> *ugly, ugly diagrams depicting how not to live.*
> *To speak the names of illnesses that fling you out of yourself regurgitates*
> *all the lightless viscera of your insides*
> *and holds them in your mouth,*
> *so you may taste what you are and be horrified by it.*[2]

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2   The right-justified inserts appearing throughout this article are text fragments taken from Jobbins's composition *Autotheory of Stigma* (2023). They thread another intimate voicing of stigma into our reflections on and with madness.

A Concert Lab of five days at TONALi Hamburg in March 2023 ends with a one-hour public performance and discussion.[3] Our theme: *Mad:Ness*. Instead of displaying a concert programme, this list outlines what we, Nat Jobbins and Lea Luka Sikau, collaborated with:

- Performance space
- Two grand pianos, one of them prepared
- Two pedestals, one equipped with a Theremin, the other one with a contact microphone and a battery-driven amplifier
- The concept of a performance in three acts:
  ACT I: MAD SONGS GO MAD
  ACT II: INSCRIBING MADNESS
  ACT III: MAD FUTURES
- Two projectors for large-scale projections on two walls of the space
- Videography to shoot imagery that gets projected; showing us and materials relating to the repertoire
- Recomposed versions of Robert Schumann's *Dichterliebe* (1840)
- Compositions by Nat Jobbins, reworking themes of Schumann's *Lieder*
- A Doppelganger: Franz Schubert's "Doppelgänger" facing Nat Jobbins's *Doppelgänger*
- Clara Schumann's *Lorelei* (1843)
- Georges Aperghis's *Retrouvailles* (2013) as well as *Récitation 9* and *10* (1977-78)
- Compositions by Nat Jobbins on stigmatization of mental illnesses, e.g. *Autotheory of Stigma* and *Mantra* (both 2023)
- Technical support and curation by the TONALi Team
- Bits of electroacoustic sounds and songs interweaving with texts such as:

Nat: 200 years ago, 'mad' people were everywhere.
Lea Luka: Das war vor dem Panoptikum.
Nat: We didn't need to name them. There were thousands of ways to be a human, to flourish and to suffer, to speak sense and to speak beyond sense. Then, as a human obsession with the human brain began to grow…
Lea Luka: Aber nicht das Gehirn an sich. Nur die Obsession.
Freud war viel beschäftigt.
Nat: …we produced diagnoses that prescribed how to be and not be a person. These diagnoses have sometimes helped us to heal one another. But in the process of doing so, we who have been labelled absorb an understanding of ourselves as somehow broken.
Lea Luka: Stigma als Kennzeichnung, als Zeichen von Andersartigkeit. Es trifft auf die Haut, sticht in sie hinein, durch sie durch.
Nat: Diagnoses did not begin in our bodies but were written on them. How can we remember, even as we rely on them, to throw them off? I guess I want to say: there are messier ways to be 'mad'.

I. Rut, Repeat, So We Are Mad[e]
(Im wunderschönen Monat ---)

Consider this:
You go to a room to be told you are not mad.
You are told you are not mad because the ways in which you are badly made
are a little bit like the ways all these other people are also badly made.

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3   Jobbins and Sikau 2023, https://vimeo.com/901407046?share=copy#t=0 [01.02.2024].

Out of the darkness float the sounds of a piano. Four beats of R. Schumann that have risen out of so many darknesses for so many decades, a yearning, slippery, unravelled chord. Before I, the pianist, spill onward, the bar line – this smooth, disciplined musical wall – arrests me. I begin again.

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I hit my head another thrice against this wall before a vocalist breaks my trance. I breach bar two. But we are misaligned: she begins her phrases as I finish mine (our harmony spiked by a sharp nine), and we spiral into another stuck cycle, this time our rut the half a phrase I couldn't break through before.

She whispers the poem hoarsely, spittle in her breath audible through a contact mic. I descend, resigned but not without a fight, into the eternal return carved out between two bar lines, four beats apart.

Fig. 2. Lea Luka Sikau sits back to back with Nat Jobbins, interpreting Schubert's "Doppelgänger".

I. Copies of Copies of Copies (Doppelganger[s])

You are not healed but your brokenness is real and
more than that, it is something to learn to lean into and live with, or to fix.
A fable about how to unbreak the way you are made
which is: not for this world, not for this way.

Back-to-back on the piano stool, we bring Franz Schubert's leaden "Doppelgänger" to sound. On the wall rests a huge copy of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, lit by a shuddering projector. From one page, the vocalist stares across the binding at a flipped copy of herself, who stares back, both flat as the words of the manual. We on the stool cannot meet our eyes.

Haven't we heard these words before? An audience wonders silently. Didn't they play the pianist's own *Doppelganger* setting earlier? And wasn't it the pianists who stared at one another across the binding? Copies aren't fleshy, people are.

II. Hitting with Solfège, or, Inscriptions of Madness

You step out of the spelling room, the place of filing
how not to be a person, and find that your madnessnonmadness is a curse.
This neurotic bureaucracy has stencilled you with defects that are now
sanitized of all the thready stories that anchor you
in the hot tangly mess that makes you real.
Illness is the new real.

Images of hands appear on the pedestals and on the over-sized pages of the book copy. These gestures compulsively repeat a solfège order: "mi fa do (lo) re" [it hurts me], trying to make meaning through silent sounds; necessarily missing the one bit (lo) that cannot be translated into this musical language.

I, the vocalist, walk towards Nat to ring in the start of Aperghis's *Retrouvailles* – the ones that found each other again. But instead of greeting them (after finding them), I go around to face their backs and start hammering a Solfègian "mi" into their shoulder blades. Meanwhile, Nat presses syncopations onto their rib cage. Two rhythms cut against each other and simultaneously inscribe vibrational forces into one body.
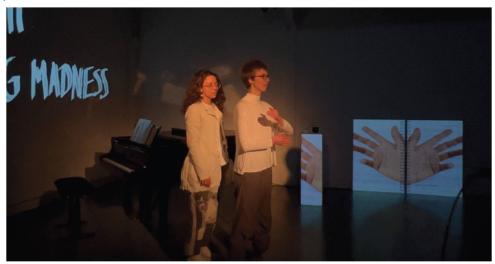

Fig. 3. Interpretation of Aperghis's Retrouvailles.

III. Storying Madness So That We May Voice

A stigma was once the physical puncture made by a pointed instrument:
the mark of a stick, a tattoo, a brand.
By the 1590s the wound, keen to keep in step with Elizabethan class warfare,
had upgraded to a burn, impressed by a hot iron on human skin.
Then human skin began over decades to soak up the carnage,
and stigma became airborne.

Wounds are no longer inflicted by sticks or stones
but in the magic spelling of sharp words.

It is in the mundane, innocent casting of stigmatizing spells
that my insides are wounded.

In the performance from which these three vignettes derive, we ask: How is madness powerfully voiced in music? The question comes from many places. For one, we are musicians who need no convincing of the clarity of voicing beyond words; the task is listening properly. For another, we are people who intimately know the harm that can be inflicted by pathologizing notions of mental illness, especially when diagnosis and medical treatment are so easily grasped as practices of healing and care. Seeking to let *Madness* speak otherwise, rather than to be spoken for or about, we playfully reflect with our recent performance *Mad:Ness*, hosted by TONALi in Hamburg in March 2023.

In a narrative gesture that tracks histories of stigma and diagnosis, our piece – a multimedia, hour-long program centred sonically around piano, voice and electronics – performed the acts of inscription that, through repetition, change the body. Through a process of what Ian Hacking has called "making up people", diagnoses of mental illnesses and cognitive conditions alter how we make sense of our own actions and dispositions, shifting our relationships to ourselves and others.[4] Diagnosed subjects become caught in a "looping effect" with the diagnoses that are pressed on them.[5] In the early parts of our piece, these processes, in which written objects impress upon and alter bodies, were audible and visible. If the work of words and their repetition can produce hurtful as well as healing stories about madness, then our piece in its later moments yearned toward visions of Mad flourishing that are much messier than the course from suffering to healing charted by diagnostic manuals.

IV. Getting Everything Straight

Then—and this is the loop—the medical being into which you have been badly made gets archived in the obsessive library that files
how not to be a person, and you become
Exhibit A for Neurosis X,
assisting in the discovery of others like you.

You change, diagnosis changes with you.
The paperwork spells are kept in the loop, and
a sea of badly made mutants
floods the sane city.
Afraid of being disappeared by magic, you face a choice:
confess to being cursed or hide away.
Confession seals the stigmatizing spell, and hiding hurts.

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4   Hacking 2007: 285.
5   Hacking 2004: 279.

To theorize *through* madness, as Mad bodyminds, we gather other enmeshed ways of uttering how not to be a person that refuse the dutiful return to psychologizing stories about mental illness.[6] In the key of queer phenomenology, Sara Ahmed taught us both how bodies become straight by "lining up" with already-given lines.[7] Lining up is repeated through rituals marking points on the line of the lifecourse (adolescence, marriage, birth), cultivated modes of being-with (gender segregation, two-parent nuclear families), material infrastructures and the prescriptions for their use (property markets, workplace leave for childcare, coded dress). Lines generate a sense of direction, of futurity and belonging, but more than that, are themselves directions, that is, imperatives. Compulsory heterosexuality "does the straightening", and queerness is "deviant" because it scrambles in every direction except along this line. Many involved in disability justice, who seek to reclaim what it means to be Mad, read an analogous process of normalization and othering through the production of mental illness as incompatible with functioning or thriving as a full member of society.

Ahmed tugs us further into not thinking straight. If these straightening lines, these instructive directions, direct life in some ways more than in others through the requirement that we follow what is already given to us, then a "good life" requires returning the debt of this life by the arrival at certain points along a directed life course. A "queer life" is then the failure to make these returns, and instead to deviate, to turn away from some objects and toward others, to disorientate. She tells us, "to live out a politics of disorientation might be to sustain wonder about the very forms of social gathering".[8] It was through this kind of disorientation in *Mad:Ness* that we sought to voice Madly and with wonder – with hope.

V. All the Gifts of Failure

> *How would it feel to utter countercurses?*
> *To speak how you are badly made*
> *beyond the bureaucratic book of pointy word wounds,*
> *to come out of hiding, but not confessing*
> *—no, calling out the name for the violence of names*
> *and naming madness elsewhere,*
> *a real and thicker madness,*
> *the hot mess coming up for air,*
> *to squelch the pulpy paperwork*
> *and chant my badly madeness as an overflowing fact?*
> *To let the outside in, and turn me inside out?*

In the debris of a writing culture whose bureaucracies regulate, essentialise and ultimately transform which human behaviours are socially valuable, dysfunctional or dispensable, there is no subject position for the "Successful Mad". For madness, like queerness, is defined precisely by a string of repeated failures to follow the straight(ening) course of a state-approved life, one in which re/productive labour is the yardstick against which full humanness is measured. Economic value is alchemized into moral value: here ferments the rationale for a "Deserving Poor", disability benefits cuts, the countless times one writer of this piece has been pressured to accept fertility preservation before commencing testosterone therapy. Searching creatively for a way out of this straitjacket, Jack Halberstam writes for a "queer art of failure" that locates in the impossibility of certain kinds of success for marginalized people a freedom to live otherwise.[9]

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6 "Bodymind" is the terminology used by scholars and activists of disability justice. It is distinguishable from mind-bodies in so far as it tries to overcome a Cartesian split between the mind and the body. It is foregrounding the fleshiness of the brain, positing that everything really is a body. See Kafai 2022.

7 Ahmed 2006: 23.

8 Ahmed 2006: 24.

9 Halberstam 2011: 45.

In the free mess that refuses both the road to (sane) success and rationalizing stories about Madness that would heal it away, *Mad:Ness* emerges as a meshwork of nested failures. We failed to return the debt of a musical canon each time a Lied spiralled out of control or drove itself into the ground. The performance failed to contain itself, seeping into a video, a debrief with the audience, this very writing. We the performers ourselves, not to mention our performance personae, failed to pass on paper as healthy, functioning members of society. So too has the queer phenomenology that permits us our deviance failed to produce a proper theory that would secure our credibility in high places. From this space of creative failure, musicking emerges as a powerful deviation through which a thicker, messier madness might be voiced. In the lines we have strung between the rehearsals, our performance, and this writing, it is precisely this kind of madness, utterable in music, that we have embodied and lived out.

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