

## Book Review: *Rearranged*, by Kathleen Watt

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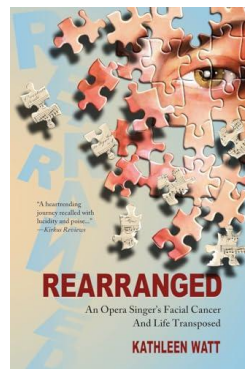
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### Book Details



In lyrical prose, with musical allusions, clinical references, and a bit of comic relief, *Rearranged* follows Kathleen Watt's plunge from the operatic stage into the netherworld of hospital life—its indigenous creatures, its peculiar language, its signposts of the mysterious human condition—through the devastation of cancer, and out the other side. Kathleen was a New York opera singer at mid-career, with a steady, lucrative chorus job at the Metropolitan Opera and solo gigs elsewhere, anticipating her best year ever. Instead, a vicious bone cancer blew her plans to smithereens, along with her face. She had to let everything go. Bit by bit, through a brutal alchemy of lethal toxins, titanium screws, and infinite kindness, she discovered new arrangements for old pieces, in a life catastrophically transposed. Not only a heart-wrenching medical odyssey, but an ultimately joyous personal journey of transformation.

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In *Rearranged*, Kathleen Watt offers a rare and intimate glimpse into two often inaccessible worlds: the complex medical processes surrounding a life-altering illness and the highly disciplined world of professional opera singers. Watt gives an in-depth description of her experience discovering facial cancer during the height of her career as a freelance operatic soprano in New York City, her journey through treatment and facial reconstruction. A highly publicized case, Watt's complex and lengthy experience with treatment and reconstruction is of interest to many. However, *Rearranged* provides a view into Watt's mind alongside the dramatic complications of her reconstruction. She philosophizes on age, disability, and accessibility, and often portrays an optimistic world view that seeps through the book's tone. As a singer intimately familiar with the workings of her vocal system, the medical perspective given by her many doctors is, at times, at odds with this familiarity. This singer's perspective on facial cancer highlights the inaccessible, intertwined, but incompatible experiences of vocal physiology as a singer with the removed but tangible medical perspective of her facial anatomy. *Rearranged* provides an opportunity to consider this kind of personal account within a voice studies

perspective, highlighting concepts of identity, accessibility and disability concerning the contradictory vocal identities of a singer going through facial reconstruction.

Watt guides the reader through her experience discovering facial cancer, finding doctors, choosing treatments and enduring years of surgeries. She weaves stories of her childhood, personal life and professional life through this narrative to give a well-rounded biographical account, enforcing her ever-present and highly identifiable authorial voice. A freelance soprano in Manhattan, she describes her experience auditioning for the Metropolitan Opera Chorus as an ad hoc and securing a place. She goes into rehearsal politics, stories of her experience in lead roles, difficulties associated with being a freelance soprano, and even a story about her last round of headshots. These stories solidify her as well-established in her field, making the reader aware of both of her knowledge about singing and love of her chosen profession.

### *Writing Style*

Set in New York City, *Rearranged* contains descriptions of places around New York and the Met Opera. Especially as a reader with a personal attachment to these places, Watt's love for both shines through. Watt discovered her cancer on vacation, and it began a years-long saga of doctors, hospitals, surgeries, treatment and reconstruction. "Apparently a rare and vicious malignant tumor was colonizing the sinus cavity behind my cheekbone, breathtakingly tailored to obliterate my profession and my raison d'être, never mind my face" (51). The most highly regarded doctors in the field suggest a flap surgery, a method that involves the newest technologies. She dives into the details of the journey, describing surgeries, choices, hospital politics, and health insurance, once having received a bill for \$72,000,000.00 due to a clerical error, illustrating the extent of the process. After many difficult recoveries, a prosthesis is required, alongside a facial reconstruction. The book has elements akin to the musical organization of some opera styles, with the narrative driven through quick recitative and containing pauses to enter the emotional world of the character at hand. Her approach to writing shifts depending on the subject matter, while she was in and out of surgeries, the middle of the book almost pauses in narrative, as was a pause in her awareness, like an aria dedicated to the confusion of constant surgeries.

Watt's writing maintains a continuously curious tone, saying her cancer diagnosis was "a time less for mortal dread than for curiosity, optimistic forward-looking" (53). The book's tone is permeated by an overwhelming optimism and perseverance to her situation, but maintains a grounded and realistic view, showing the varied nature of her responses to the journey. Using direct questions illustrating the complexity of her emotions without explaining them, her writing is very to the point, but full of exciting anecdotes. She uses small details to communicate the intricacies of the interpersonal relationships between her and her doctors, the small slights or sizeable confusions that occur. The book is filled with beautiful descriptions of people and little observations that give the reader insight into her world view. Watt is an inspiring and empathetic narrator with a wide set of interests and broad knowledge base, with witty and simultaneously adept observations about people, morality and the world around her.

One of the more prominent tonal qualities that sticks out in *Rearranged* is the use of Watt's singing experience to discuss medical concepts. To emphasize the dramatic nature of her journey, she uses references to familiar operas.

*For a fleet moment he was the enlightened sovereign of Mozart's Magic Flute, solemnly enunciating the formidable conditions of the passage to spiritual maturity. Sarastro in a lab coat. "... and the man who does that is my colleague, our Chief of Microvascular Surgery..." An electric organ chord of doom drowned out my Mozartian reverie. "... who happens to be here today..... 54*

Her discussions of doctor-doctor relationships and singer-singer relationships give a small view into worlds of extreme precision and expertise as seen through her intimate lens into each one. This tonal choice emphasizes her connection to music, consistently weaving the music and medicine in this way. However, here the music was not a catalyst of wellbeing, as her health impedes the ability to take part in music as a career and thus sustain wellbeing. She later describes how much she misses singing, but early in the book, this choice works to show her deep connection and love for her chosen profession to contrast with the unraveling events.

This use of music to describe health concepts also applies to a more subtle thematic range. In the description of her first cancer diagnosis and reading of the CT scan she stated: "So much seemed entirely unchanged. I felt nothing. These images were the only evidence of the cancer inside me – as impossible to conceive as is water to a fish" (51). She brings in this theme of interiority and external experience through the book, how the physiology of a singer's body is visually unknown to them despite being thoroughly familiar. When singing, so much work goes on inside the body that is not visible to audiences. Professional singers constantly consider the manipulation of their vocal tract, operating anatomy that is not immediately visible to them. To have the cancer appear, affecting areas like her palate and cheekbone exacerbated this relationship developed through years of singing training. The surgery chapters focused on how her facial reconstruction would work, removing and replacing anatomy which she was already intimately knowledgeable about from a singer's perspective. For example, her palate which would be replaced with an obturator, is consistently manipulated in singing. "The once splendid bell of my singing mechanism now felt like a gaping sinkhole, swallowing every surgical effort and my highest hopes." Moving from the largely referential language of singing pedagogy to the clinical and visual effects of her surgery, it affected an area of great importance for her trained professional activity.

#### *Accessibility*

*Rearranged* brings its reader into Watt's experience of singing and cancer through this intimate lens, but in doing so, Watt highlights the inaccessibility of both worlds. Operatic singing is an inaccessible, and highly valorized practice regarded from afar by most. Watt's status as a freelance singer in the Met Chorus solidifies this inaccessibility, which achieves its goal by placing opera singers on a pedestal, creating voice in a way that is akin to Olympic athletes in its stretch of the human body's capacity. Watt writes: "My singer's lifestyle always became more comprehensible to others when I compared it to an athlete's commitment of body, soul, and daily schedule" (45). This inaccessibility of singing can nod to conversations about places like the Met Opera as beacons of status, with efforts to equalize audiences who participate in the operatic tradition. However, here it refers to the capacity of the singing style itself to remove the singer from a listener's physiological understanding. Popular music scholar Heidemann describes the process of listening to vocal timbre as mirroring, an extension of Barthes' *grain de la voix* (2016). One conceives of a voice by mirroring how it would feel if they were making the same sound. The operatic vocal style, generally, stretches the body's vocal capacities, from breath support, range, resonance, and agility to simply the intensity of the sound. This same end is achieved by a myriad of means in different vocal styles, allowing a voice to communicate expertise to a listener by removing that mirroring process. Regarding Watt's experience, this renders her singing style as highly trained and specialized, and nominally inaccessible to outsiders.

This distance, created by the operatic voice, is juxtaposed with the pervasive jargon of the medical field. Watt's movement through full facial reconstruction and treatment is continuously stung by issues with accessibility. Throughout the book, the reader sporadically

experiences Watt's talent of explaining medical concepts with utmost clarity. These reflect her lengthy experience of preparing and learning about the procedures she would undergo, to communicate with different doctors and receive the best individualized treatment. "I had to learn the lingo" (205). As an outsider in an inaccessible world, she was well-researched and well-intended, but at times, it still did not prove enough. The jargon she tried to overcome did not just alienate her when choosing doctors or inquiring about procedures. "These and other common expressions acquire a shamanistic power [...] shadows of the vaguely metaphysical transformations they describe, and their portent of real-world consequences" (206). With a consistently and surprisingly unjudgmental tone, she reports the importance of terminology in this medical context, which alienates the patients for whom it will have a direct impact. She stated: "As the high drama of catastrophic diagnosis subsides into a long slog of problem solving, there is a window of personal agency. But it is limited to the outset when everything is unknown and all the language foreign." As operatic technique works to alienate the listener from intimately knowing its physiological underpinnings, Watt's experience through her cancer diagnosis reflects a similar relationship, with different consequences. The inaccessibility of the terminology surrounding her cancer diagnosis is surmounted with her own personal research, which she achieves, but it still affects her feeling of agency as a patient. Separated, as the listener is from the singer, through these different fields of extreme specialism, she feels apart from the surgeries happening to her. It is strange for one's voice and body to be spoken about and felt as inaccessible entities. While for a listener perceiving opera, this de-proximal relationship can add to the gymnastic element of the performance, for a patient receiving treatment, it results in a lack of agency with a direct and often dramatic effect on the individual. Watt's book can be interpreted in this manner, highlighting the inaccessibility of her medical experience through juxtaposition with her work as a professional opera singer.

#### *Identity & Disability*

*"My voice comes from me first of all in a bodily sense. It is produced by means of my vocal apparatus—breath, larynx, teeth, tongue, palate, and lips. It is the voice I hear resonating in my head, amplified and modified by the bones of my skull, at the same time as I see and hear its effects upon the world. It must surely have something to do with the fact that the voice issues from the sternum—with the pushing out of breath from the lungs—that the emotional being is commonly said, in the West, at least, to be located not in the head, but in the heart. If my voice is one of a collection of identifying attributes, like the colour of my eyes, hair, and complexion, my gait, physique, and fingerprints, it is different from such attributes in that it does not merely belong or attach to me. For I produce my voice in a way that I do not produce these other attributes. To speak is to perform work, sometimes, as any actor, teacher, or preacher knows, very arduous work indeed. The work has the voice, or actions of voice, as its product and process; giving voice is the process which simultaneously produces articulate sound, and produces myself, as a self-producing being." (Connor, 2000, 3-4)*

Voice studies scholar, Steven Connor's beautifully eloquent account of the nature of voice and identity, gets at the heart of the central theme running through *Rearranged*. Watt's experience with facial cancer changed her relationship with how she communicates her identity to the world. If voice is "one of a collection of identifying attributes", it was not only the sound of her voice that was changed, but the idea of voice as her professional career that shifted. Performing work through her voice, the athleticism of opera singing turned into a daily struggle to phonate.

*For a time after my own cancer surgeries, I felt as bereft of myself as I was of my voice. I could scribble my needs, issuing updates from behind my mask of stitches*

*and Steri-Strips, but my face was unable to deliver the myriad of mini-movements that orchestrate our words, giving them life, personal meaning, identity. And I missed seeing my reflection in the faces of others. I began to lose track of my own subtexts, and myself.*

*Rearranged* points to the plurality that makes up how identity is communicated to the world, as highlighted through Watt's loss and shift of mindset. Watt's performance of an identity mixes with her perception of how others see her. Her relationship with communication shifted, as others could not recognize her responses, and changed their responses themselves, both those close to her and strangers on the street. As the "organ of my expression" the short-term loss of her voice alters her relationship with herself as a "self-producing being," shifting the way she related with others and herself.

Watt enters into discussions of disability, as she chronicles her journey through these shifts in identity. She experienced taking on the role of the survivor, the continuously positive patient who must communicate enthusiasm to those around her, marking an ability to overcome. This narrative of overcoming was helpful to Watt in certain contexts but was just one of many narratives of her surgery process. She highlights the fluid nature of the interior and performed thought processes, as shifts in expressed identity necessitated by her surgeries occasionally contradict her internal state. Watt writes about disability through the lens of other scholars, but the most convincing method of communicating these ideas in *Rearranged* is through the short, insightful replays of her experiences that refer the reader back to this conflicting internal and external performance. Watt's memoir is filled with these modes of contradiction, as with the loss of her voice and performance career through the multi-layered surgery process, this being the dramatic pathos that brought acclaim to her experience. However, *Rearranged* accounts the subtleties of these contradictions, working them into a lived experience for the reader through Watt's insightful portraits of small experiences, providing the reader adequate vehicle to come to their own conclusions about big topics like ageism, disability, and identity formation.

Watt's memoir highlights what we, as thinkers about the intersection of music, health and wellbeing, can stand to gain from reading accounts like this from a voice studies perspective. On the surface, *Rearranged* combines music, health and wellbeing from Watt's experience as a singer going through facial reconstruction working through years of hospital treatments. However, it also hits the intersection of these fields at a deeper level, as a musicological reading leads us to think about voice and identity as correlates of wellbeing. This account is a personal example of the need to reconsider the direct link of voice and identity as informing wellbeing – even and especially for Watt as a professional voice user. She unpacks the intersection of her voice and identity as a singer when that relationship was suddenly and dramatically altered. *Rearranged* is easily read from an academic perspective, providing an opportunity to analyze this personal experience to challenge and/or reflect on current theories of voice, accessibility, and identity. All the while, one is brought along the narrative journey by Watt's pervasive verve, making *Rearranged* an informative, thought-provoking and enjoyable read.

## References

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### **About the Reviewer**

Jessie Edgar is a DPhil candidate in music and physiology at the University of Oxford. Like Kathleen, she grew up in New England and lived for a period in New York City while attending Columbia University. She is also a professional soprano, using this knowledge of the voice to inform her research. These similarities led Kathleen and Jessie together to bring *Rearranged* to the *International Journal of Music Health and Wellbeing*.