

# The New York Times

## Review: In 'Place,' a Composer Questions His Comfort, and Power



Ted Hearne, the composer of “Place,” conducting next to his onstage alter ego (sung by Steven Bradshaw) while Ayanna Woods, Isaiah Robinson, Josephine Lee and Sophia Byrd sing above. Credit Credit Richard Termine for The New York Times

**By Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim**

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The drive for redemption has inspired much of Western music. But what might redemption mean to a contemporary American composer sensitized to social injustice?

On Thursday, at the Harvey Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the composer Ted Hearne orchestrated the redemption of a white millennial from Fort Greene neighborhood worried about his role in its gentrification. At the end of his 80-minute work “Place,” for singers and onstage chamber ensemble, Mr. Hearne stepped away

from the conductor's spot and took up a protester's placard. The lights went out on him raising the blank sign, his feet firmly planted at center stage.

Politics have been in the foreground of Mr. Hearne's music before. He has taken on subjects including WikiLeaks, sexual consent and President Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric. Produced by Beth Morrison Projects and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, "Place" is billed as a [meditation on gentrification](#) and wider issues of privilege and inequality. But it's also a show about artistic ego. What saves it from devolving into a woke man's soliloquy, set in the key of pandering, is that the composer gazes at himself with acerbic detachment.

Mr. Hearne had help. The first part of the libretto is made up of a collage of his own writings and others', such as a breakup letter mixed in with fragments of James Baldwin. In the second part, the poet and spoken word artist Saul Williams provided caustic, needling lines that underpin the remainder of the show as its perspective shifts from the personal to the social.

Mr. Hearne and Mr. Williams joined forces with the director Patricia McGregor who, with the set designers Tim Brown and Sanford Biggers, created a multitiered staging. This highlighted the vectors of urban change and displacement pushing outward from the protagonist's home — a cubicle, really — at the center.

"Place" takes shape in songs that emerge like a graffiti mural as repetitive gestures gradually bloom into vibrant, brash statements in high-volume color. The six singers bring with them deep familiarity with diverse vocal styles; the sole white male, Steven Bradshaw, resembles and represents Mr. Hearne. The real Mr. Hearne, a few feet away, leads the 18-strong ensemble from a conductor's area kitted out with a keyboard and console that allow him to electronically distort elements of the sound.

Singer Ted undergoes a process of learning — or at least exposure — as the protective walls of his home fall away and he hears voices that challenge his cozy complacency. But sly little touches show that it's Composer Ted who's on the hook. During "A Thought," the singer Ayanna Woods hurls the word "migration" into Mr. Hearne's face and briefly seizes control of his keyboard. In "Maps (Appropriation)," we see Singer Ted at his keyboard groove to an R&B chorus on scaffolding above. When he grabs one musical fragment and samples it digitally, the singers fall silent and look down aghast.

And for a moment, the composer and his alter ego face off directly. Who is in control? Then Singer Ted takes charge, tapping out a rhythm on a glass bottle.

Eventually the fictional Mr. Hearne leaves the stage, giving space to impassioned statements from the other singers. Sol Ruiz was a haunting presence, her sharp-edged voice equal parts harangue and pain. Josephine Lee brought a sensuous, bluesy tone to her numbers; Isaiah Robinson performed with church-burning intensity.

But it was impossible to ignore the presence of the real Mr. Hearne at his command post conducting the musicians, manipulating the sound and driving the pace of a social auto-

da-fé of his own orchestration. His score is stylistically diverse, with a sophisticated weirdness to the color palette. The odd bowed cymbal or greedily gurgling contrabass clarinet prevented things from getting too fun in jazzed-up numbers. It always felt as if Mr. Hearne was questioning his own comfort and — in the final moment — his power.

Place

Through Saturday at the Harvey Theater, Brooklyn Academy of Music; 718-636-4100, [bam.org](http://bam.org).