

Bernhard Lang

On Songbook II, "Wenn die Landschaft aufhört", version for Soprano from 2016

Sarah: Dear Bernhard, the text to 'Wenn die Landschaft aufhört' ('When the Landscape Ceases') is from an old friend of yours, correct? It stirs up quite a number of associations. I feel and understand it as if it was fragments of thought in a wide landscape in which one is simultaneously too full and too empty in one's soul. A situation in which one is endlessly calm and, at the same time, endlessly unhappy while still able to snatch some blissful moments from time to time. But that of course is just my personal interpretation, and the quality of the text is such that each person will certainly create their own remembered or imagined landscape.

Bernhard Lang: Dieter Sperl is an old friend of mine from Graz. He practices Zen Buddhism; the simultaneous feeling of being full and empty is a real theme here, as well as the melancholy that comes with it. It was the rhythm and quality of the sounds used which brought me to choose this text: it's the second setting of it. I had already used Dieter's text in Songbook I in 2004, at that time using the English translation. I was fascinated by the stream-of-consciousness character which brings associations with Burroughs, Joyce and Christian Loidl's ICHT to mind.

The piece itself develops with loops whose pace is set by the text, analogous to the video loops used by Raffael Montanez Ortiz; the voice articulates these loops in a new kind of rap-singing, somewhere between the rhythm of speech and a more pointillistic style of intonation.

Sarah: You have used the pattern-technique for many years now. Could you describe what has caused this technique to have such a hold on you?

Bernhard: It's difficult to justify a fascination or passion. I recently saw a video from 1981 in which I played a few pieces with my band on television – loops loops loops - maybe it's the jazzy or rocky elements that I've been able to convey through the paradigm of New Music.

Sarah: In this 'landscape', I tend to have to work in a closer manner to speaking or shouting as a vocalist as the tessitura stays within the speaking range. There are only high notes to sing at the very end of the piece. The song was actually written for baritone but you've transposed it up a tone for me, although a baritone is much closer to a natural speaking voice in this range.

Does that mean that a rather undramatic, natural kind of expression was important to you?

For example, in the first part of "Cold-Trip", your version of Winterreise, you evoke memories of pop and rock songs by your use of rhythm and the presence of four amplified guitars. That makes a kind of sense, taking into consideration that Schubert's original pieces are also 'songs'. The ideal version when singing Schubert's original version is to sing as 'simply' and 'naturally' as possible, even when singing with as much resonance and overtones as possible and with a low larynx (firstly in order to be heard well in a large concert hall but secondly to give the sound a warmth and beauty): the sound of the so-called 'classical art of singing'. We say and do this as if pop and rock singers were somehow less artificial than 'artistic' singers. But this is of course completely false, as pop and rock singers perform enormous feats of craftsmanship with their voices; they have simply trained other muscles to do different tasks and use a microphone to allow themselves to be heard. The 'coloratura' and whistle-tones of someone like Christina Aguilera are extremely virtuosic, just as much as the multiphonics used by Brian Johnson or the laryngeal techniques employed by different metal singers. The method of expression is just different, as well as the musical language used: in pop or rock, there are usually significantly fewer layers and a more simplistic harmony and so less discourse takes place within the music. The listener is as a result confronted with fewer ideas, contradictions and emotions and less concentration is required to follow the line of the song.

In my opinion, the sense of pop or rock singing being more 'natural' is simply a question of being used to it. What do you think?

Bernhard: I see myself as a bit of a musical vampire, sucking the blood from the sound of pop singing and writing it down within the formalized structure of a historically-grounded notational system. This blood refreshes and widens the landscape of classical singing, which isn't really progressively developing at the moment: at least as far as I can see. And this pulsing sprechgesang or 'rapitative' is an example of just such a new discovery; the text is transported along at great speed by its sound and beat. A prime example of this is the young man and his wedded bride from the "Reigen" by Schnitzler.

*Interview via Email in January 2017
translation by John Roskilly*