Helmut Lachenmann

on 'Got Lost', 2007-08

Sarah: Dear Helmut, what is your relationship to the voice?

Helmut: The singing voice is expressive *a priori*, very loaded, with a completely personal and individual aura. It's a message from the human body and from the personality. I wanted to keep this in check, which was also the case in 'Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern'. I've always sort of 'forbidden' my students to write Lieder on texts by Nietzsche, Hölderlin, Celan or Beckett, whose immensely poetic and phonetic intensity would be totally watered down and obfuscated by being sung. A text by Hölderlin being sung?! I find that unbearable.

The Lieder by Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Wolff, Strauss, Mahler, Schönberg, Berg Webern, all beautiful jewels of the romantic and late romantic periods, have a more or less quotational character in accordance with their stressless, intact tonal language. They take knowledge of their texts for granted. The majority of melodic themes used by Schubert are indirect quotations of songs. We can see this through the relatively few songs that Mozart and Beethoven wrote; in Mahler at the latest this quotational character becomes very obvious. It's all imaginary or recomposed folk songs. Even if the poetic power of the song texts is a little weaker, that's no reason not to love the songs themselves. Almost all the sung passages in Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* are atonally-styled folk songs: "Das ist schöne Jägerei", "Eia popeia…", "Mädel, was fangst Du jetzt an", "Hopp-Hopp" etc. That means that the subject, becoming aware of it's voicelessness, has retreated.

At least since Sigmund Freud and Robert Musil, there hasn't been a really autonomous 'I'. The so-called 'I' in reality comprises a more or less unreflective sum of instincts and impulses which we're subjected to and with which we grow up. It was no accident that the primarily highly expressive Schoenberg, traumatized by Wagner and Mahler, didn't just break through the borders of tonality but delegated the control of harmony and melodic articulation to more or less characterful twelve-tone rows, setting in motion his subversive process which was continued by his pupil Anton von Webern and taken even further by young composers in post-war Europe, totally getting rid of the well-worn musical concepts of old in favour of serially-controlled sound structures which were to a large part algorithmically generated. The expressively loaded 'I' communicated its speechlessness through quite naked structures of sound.

The most extreme moments of Berg, the most expressive of his contemporaries, were qualified by his writing 'without expression' above them. That means that when things really get serious, people are no longer expressive. Messages conveying existential threats were communicated 'without pitch' and certainly not sung. The inconsistency of the singing voice with a structural approach, stamped into my concept of music as a post-war composer of the second generation, was a problem for me.

As a result, I interpreted the basic text of 'Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern' first and foremost as phonetic entities. The listener, when listening multiple times (and one must always listen to 'challenging' music multiple times), can sense the torn-apart text from its phonetic components, as if deciphering the aged inscription on an old tomb stone, where the individual letters are exposed separately, so to speak. I used this principle in 'Got Lost'.

Sarah: How did you come to use these three texts? In my interpretation, they present three different circumstances in which one endures as a lover and as a living person:

Nietzsche expresses the fear, or bravery, of existence in four lines.

Pessoa manages to describe the split between an inner, elevated feeling and the knowledge of one's own ridiculousness with a sly wink. It is the very act of being sincere that makes one ridiculous. So one should always oneself seriously, but never too seriously!

The notice in the lift brings one back to earth, to the facts of daily life. Every text is a reference for the other two, so that one can never lose themselves fully in any of the circumstances. You have managed to present the contradictions in the text through music without using illustrative, expressionistic or psychological music.

Helmut: "There is no path any more. Only the abyss and silence. That's what you wanted." This speaks naturally to the situation that artistic creators find themselves in. "Now, wanderer, is the time! Now look hard and clear. You are lost, and believe only in danger." With all of his explosiveness, this poem by Nietzsche, as with all poems that mean anything to me, has an unmistakeably unique and purely phonetically potent character. I took this as a starting point when composing. At the same time, I had to work against the somewhat outdated Pathos of the poetry, being as I am a somewhat shy man from Swabia. I achieved this in no small part by the interweaving of this with the other two (completely incompatible) texts. The poem by Nietzsche is expressed almost without exception only with shouts: exclamation, calling, invocation. Shouting works first and foremost through its phonetic presence.

In daily life, relatively complicated information is sometimes communicated by way of a simple loaded cry. "Help!" or "Please!". In Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*: "Rühr mich nicht an!" ("Don't touch me!"). That is information communicated as a phonetic event. This is seen throughout my 'Das Mädchen mit den

Schwefelhölzern': the girl freezes, jitters, is astonished, cries "Grandmother, take me with you!"

So there's no direct speech as in Wagners *Walküre*: "whoever's home this may be, I must rest here"… Setting something like that requires the intact well-worn musical forms. It's only possible in the 21st century in entertainment.

"Abyss" is a separate phonetic entity from "Silence" or "Path" or "Surrender your will". When composing, I stuck to the phonetic, acoustically transmitted sound qualities and linked them in different ways with the piano sounds.

The second text, by Fernando Pessoa (one of my favourite poets), is a pathetic-heroic cadence diametrically opposed to the Nietzsche. With all of its cheerfulness in the foreground, it deals with an abysmal playing on the word "ridiculas" ("ridiculous"), which I took quite seriously. Pessoa's poem with its refrain-like repetition of the world "ridiculas" has a somewhat dance-like and lilting character which sabotages the heroic tenor of the Nietzsche poem. Real singing is foreign to both of these texts.

But the sound and content of the third text, which I found as a notice on the wall of a lift, is a real lament about a terrible blow of fate: "Today my laundry basket got lost. It was last seen standing near to the dryer. As it is pretty difficult to carry my laundry without it I would be happy to get it back". A phrase from Karl Kraus has accompanied almost my every day: "I would like to have my own problems".

I therefore forced three texts together whose contents convey themselves and simultaneously extinguish each other. With the security offered by their incompatibility, I was finally able to compose the piece.

Sarah: "Got Lost" is, of all of the songs with piano that I have learnt and sung to date, the most like a real duet. The voice and piano operate at the same level and are so closely intertwined with one another, with no interchangeable notes, nor one too few or too many notes that might disrupt the meshing of the two musicians. Was that a deliberate goal of yours when you were writing 'Got Lost'? To compose a real duo instead of a soprano solo with piano accompaniment (or indeed the other way around)?

You achieved this close connection and equality between the two by creating many layers and interlocking them: I sing and speak in three languages (which also have different musical gestures) and also perform as an oral percussionist. Jan Philip plays on the keyboard, with the piano strings, is a percussionist and a reciter. Apart from that, we 'play' together, in that Philip pushes a certain combination of keys and I sing into the piano, making the strings resonate.

Was this interlocking and use of effects also an interpretation of the texts, or a musical idea completely separate from the text? Would you have written exactly the same for two other instruments without text?

One has to be completely precise rhythmically while simultaneously paying

close attention to their partner in order to complement or disrupt their dynamics, timbres, phrasing and sense of excitement.

There are never any moments of independence outside of the solistic passages, into which one is introduced, accompanied or continued.

Through this, the dialogue which we create sensitively, virtuosically, sometimes rapidly or brutally is above all intimate. It is therefore something like a love song, if only in a performance sense and not in an illustrative sense. It is unsentimental and contemporary.

Have I understood it correctly? Was that your intention?

Helmut: I always try to create a 'new instrument' when I write for a particular group, which was also the case with 'Got Lost'. The voice and piano together form a unique new instrument: an imaginary instrument. This instrument is created and, also, destroyed. I could never write two pieces for the same 'instrument'. You should only juice a lemon once, and do it completely.

In 'Got Lost', there is this shadow of a breathy vocal sound on a 'w'. I built a scale around this. Sometimes this shadow appears only in the vocal part and sometimes it disappears and we only hear the piano. Really I'm a sort-of old serialist. I never want to use a sound only for its own sake. It always has to be used in some context.

The same applies to the shouts. There's a whole scale: shouts with two notes. Shouts which cut off the piano pedal. Shouts without a pedal. Or only shout-like striking of the piano.

Another category is movement. There are very quick movements in the piano part. They are for the most part not very difficult to play and lie well for the hand. They are wholly without figurative fanciness. I could also just do a glissando! A glissando would be a variation of these runs on the piano. Or vice-versa. I also sometimes only use white keys, then only black keys. Or I imagine a piano with some broken strings, meaning that I hear only a C, F#, perhaps a G#, D#, and E when I perform a glissando. Through this, a harmony comes through.

I play around with these concepts. That's one of my techniques when I compose.

Interview from February 3rd 2017, Stuttgart

Translation by John Roskilly