

Philippe Manoury on his opera "Kein Licht" (Text: Elfriede Jelinek)

performed at Rhurtriennale, Opéra Comique Paris, National Theatre Zagreb/Hrvatsko Narodno Kazalište, Opéra National du Rhin Strasbourg, Grand Théâtre du Luxembourg in 2017

Interview from September 2017

Sarah:

Dear Philippe, what was your starting point for this opera ("Kein Licht", 2017)? What are your main concerns regarding the voice?

Philippe Manoury:

Frequently, I start from the text itself. I am very concerned about the natural way of speaking and its accentuation. At the same time, I refuse to be prisoner of that. To differentiate between "noisy" parts of language (consonants) and the pitched part (vowels) was a technique which I used for some compositions for choir. I wrote some pieces for choir and electronics in which I give the noises, the consonants, to one part of the group and the vowels to the other part. Then I reconstructed the text by synchronizing them. I am not attached though to some of the contemporary voice-aspects in the Berio/Aperghis style. Sequenza III by Berio or Recitations by Aperghis seem to describe a foolish personality to me. And I find it difficult to find contemporary voice pieces which are in fact NOT in this style. It's hard to find something which describes an interior feeling without that ironic aspect. I have the feeling that contemporary music is a prisoner of these aspects of the voice.

Sarah:

While the post-war generation of art broke with narration and realism, the hyper-realistic film industry increased immensely. The consumption of "realistic" narration and "realistic" characters is bigger worldwide than ever in history. Is that because people have a great need for storytelling and explanations? On the other hand, theatre (in Germany for instance with Castorff, Pollesch, Schlingensiefel etc) is the place where physical energetic output, absurdities, grotesqueness, experiments, foolishness and irony take place. It's a perishable, entertaining form of theatre and it undermines the narrative of "A leads to B". I find this drifting-apart to be an interesting process. When I am interpreting music, I am looking for the narration of every bar though, and I am trying to find reasonable meaning in every syllable, which makes a somewhat disparate

piece like Sequenza III by Berio more urgent and existential. I remember that you told us in our first meeting of the "Kein Licht" - production team, that you don't believe in narration anymore.

Philippe:

I didn't mean that I don't believe in narrative structure. What I mean is that I don't believe anymore in the Codes of the traditional opera, which include the idea that a singer pretends to be a historical character (like Carmen or Donna Anna). Nevertheless, I think that a singer can express different characters: What took me a long time to realize is that every voice changes its character a lot when it is jumping in intervals, for example. The expression in different registers is completely different - something that doesn't occur with other instruments.

Composers since WWI, mostly influenced by Webern, created a singing style with huge jumps through registers at all times, which destroys totally the unity of the words. I always try to fight against that. I want the text to be understood. I don't want the word to be destroyed in pixels.

Sarah:

You want to use the unique possibility of the instrument of the "voice" to transport an intellectual message?

Philippe:

To transport a meaningful message, yes. In "Kein Licht", I'm using the old fashioned technique of highlighting the most important adjectives or nouns, the most important information, by putting them on the most important notes, while the articles are on the non-emphasised notes. I do anything I can to transport the meaning of the text as clearly as possible through the music. I use the different characters of the registers for that as well. Something which doesn't work at all for me is using a banal text like "give me the tuna sandwich" but trying to stylize it with "contemporary" techniques. I feel and hear a wrong emphasis in that, a discrepancy between the density of the sounds and that of the meaning, which I don't like.

In "Kein Licht", I did not use any bits of Jelinek's text which are too concrete and "real" for the sung parts. To avoid this, I used the metaphysical or philosophical lines for the singing. If you decide to sing instead of to speak a text, you want to emphasise the emotional content of the text.

Sarah:

When you sent me the first drafts of "Kein Licht", my impression was that the lines for the voices are written quite traditionally. But taking a closer look at

the different layers (orchestra, ensembles, choir), it became clear that you focused on different themes of Jelinek's text and their emotional impact. And that all the layers together create adequate and very different musical numbers. The Lamento terzet for three women and one dog, for instance, is heartbreaking, slightly self-ironic and full of tension. Its suspense is created through dissonant, often neat intervals of our three female voices, which eventually spread out in wider dimensions when the dog joins in with howling or barking or growling. A perfect match for Jelinek's thinking process about a postatomic-catastrophic landscape where the only survivors are some women and some dogs. Then you wrote the Schnatter-Oratorium, which couldn't be further away from that. All our—by themselves quasi traditional—lines together create a vivid, superficial, wild, re-thinking, pseudo-philosophical stream of consciousness. The words leave the mouth quicker than you could think it through, which is a perfect musical equivalent for Jelinek's writing.

Philippe:

I found lots of musicality in Jelinek's writing. There is so much sound and music already in it. Like in poems. Perhaps it helps that she was a musician herself. I don't know if she is aware of this aspect in her texts or not. But, in fact, I found many correspondences of vowels and consonants and sounds in the text, which gave me a musical structure and helped me a lot. While the meaning of Jelinek's texts is sometimes hard to understand, their sonic content is mostly very clear to me. When I compose, I generally create a harmonic structure first. After I've done that, I travel in this landscape with the voices. And, only after that is finished, I start with the orchestration. And then I probably rewrite the voices.

Another thing, which is very important for me, is the awareness of the intervals. Some intervals have a stronger tension than some others. When I want to express a situation of sadness or desolation (for example in the trio with the dog), I will not abuse the major 7th or minor 9th, but preferably major 2nd and 3rd, or 4th or 5th. It is less cultural than natural. Those intervals react with our neurological system and, very far from this stupid idea to return to tonal music again, I take those arguments on the weights of the intervals very seriously.

Sarah:

That's interesting, thinking of Lionel Peintre's Baritone solo about the radioactive wind. You used a very complex, virtuous structure of wood winds there.

Philippe:

Yes; in the Duet between you and Olivia as well. Those numbers are both

talking about

contaminated wind and nature and the desperate attempt to flee. What I did for the first time in this opera is: I tried to use different extremes. For instance, I like the very quick speaking of your last number, which I combined with a very different time structure. ("Das Gerede zieht immer weitere Kreise...") I didn't write many or big solos in this opera because there are no characters or personages in this text. Which is really good.

Sarah:

The scala of different tempi and timing in this opera is immense. There couldn't be a bigger difference then between the Lamenti and my last number. Which makes it colourfully flavoured, spicy and diverting to listen to. Because one's own aural structuring of time is entertained in so many different ways.

Philippe:

The last movement (Lamento "Oh Mensch") is a quotation of Mahler's 3rd symphony. The difference is: in Mahler's symphony it's in descending seconds, and in my piece it's descending major seconds plus a quarter tone. An interval between a major second and minor third.

There are three tributes in "Kein Licht". "Oh Mensch" from Mahler's Third symphony. "Guter Mensch" from Berg's Wozzeck: because I think that Jelinek quoted Beethoven with it, I quoted exactly the musical line of Berg. And the third tribute appears in your Trio with one Dog, when you sing the high B and Olivia joins in with G sharp - that's from Strauss' Rosenkavalier, the last Terzett. Then I quoted Mozart's instrumentation in Number Nine. It's three female voices with a small group of instruments behind them. Just horn, clarinet, flute and trumpet. I like that. The instruments are like shadows of the voices. Not an accompaniment. These shadows transform the colours of the voices. It would sound completely different with a small string orchestra behind them. Woodwinds are all about breathing of course, like the voices. I am very happy with that movement.