



TENSO

The European network for professional chamber choirs

Tenso Professionals Meeting

WORDS IN MUSIC - MOTS ET MUSIQUE DANS L'ART CHORAL

Philharmonie de Paris, 23-24 January 2017

in the framework of the Biennale de l'Art Vocal

report

After opening words by **Emmanuel Hondré** (Director of Concerts Dept., Philharmonie de Paris) and **Leo Samama** (Chief artistic council of Tenso), the keynote was given by Prof. **Eero Tarasti** (Sibelius Academy – University of the Arts, Helsinki) around « Verbal and non-verbal aspects of music ». This enlightening introduction to semiotics in music opened up unsuspected paths to the untold (and mostly un-noticed) signs in the musical works of Sibelius, Wagner and Stravinsky, as of how the signification is conveyed by and through perceptible communication. Along the five main vectors of meaning in interaction – (will – can – know – must – believe) – Prof. Tarasti takes examples and references from key figures of semiotics and structural studies such as Fernand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Noam Chomsky. As it appeared later, Prof. Sarasti's conclusion, « Texts can say many different things, but music has the truth », could apply to almost every situation where music has to deal with the presence of words, text or subtext.

Monday 23 January

The composer face to face with the text (moderator : **Laurent Slaars**)

This panel brought together two French composers with an experienced ear for the voice, **Philippe Hersant** and **Thierry Machuel**, along with **Sebastian Androne** (Romania) and **Violeta Cruz** (Colombia) two promising young composers in the making.

- Having set to music a record number of nearly forty different languages, **Thierry Machuel** highlighted the multilingual text as the main vector of inspiration to his very personal and politically committed action as a creator, giving illustration from his *Elégies romanes*, a choral cycle after five European poems in their original languages. Arranged side-by-side, or even in a same polyphony, different languages vindicate and symbolize the delicate harmony of the people of the Earth, as living different situations and various levels of social commitment.
- Exemplifying her emblematic twelve minute piece after Virginia Woolf, *The Lake of my Mind*, **Violeta Cruz** gave a living sonic presence to a wide array of sensorial feelings, casting an almost cubist description of a « silent conscience » flying over secondary events as lived by the six different characters of the Woolf novel *The Waves*. Musically, she made wonders with the « oily somnolence of the mind » that permeates Woolf's highlight.
- With *Fearful Darkness*, a short choral piece rewarded by Tenso in its 2015 Young Composer's Workshop, **Sebastian Androne** set new standards in the long-living art of musical deploration. The text consists of four lines from the memoirs of queen Mary of Romania, to whom Androne says he wanted to express a personal tribute through sonic marks of « sad tenderness ». Says Androne : " The artist is a constructor of mirrors in which, at first, he sees himself, and only after, what he wanted the mirror to reflect".
- **Philippe Hersant** is widely known for giving memory and remembrance a key role in his inspirational process, in what he calls the « seminal presence of cracks and fractures ». His



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vocal cycle *Instants limites* is set to words by prisoners of the Clairvaux penitentiary. The role of written or spoken words in the process of musical sedimentation appeared as a key feature with all four composers.

The writer face to face with the music (moderator : Sylvie Douche)

- Dutch composer and poet **Rozalie Hirs** stressed the importance of reading poetry (including in different languages) instead of merely listening to it, giving ways to different shades and lightings according to each language. Reading and listening poetry have different musical implications, as the reader commits to a choice of tempo, colours, accents... Hirs also reminds some of Eero Tarasti's semiotic options when exemplifying etymological nuances between languages for a same word : *Erinnerungen* (coming back in the middle of...) ; *Remembering* (putting things together again) ; *Souvenir* (coming from under), all opening different musical possibilities.
- Choral conductor **Nicole Corti** stressed the role of spoken and musical discourse in social life, when words and music happen to convey different meanings in a same piece (concrete meaning as opposed to symbolic meaning).
- As frequent collaborators, Irish poet **Aoife Mannix** and British composer **Stephen McNeff** had to answer a key question : « Who's that we're talking to », as the most important issue for contemporary music after contemporary texts (« don't just stick to Shakespeare and the Bible ! »). For Mannix, « very few chosen words can make a lot of music ». Symbolically, McNeff links the idea of geographical borders of Europe, as felt in western Ireland or Portugal, with the limitations of linguistic capabilities.

Intertextuality in music (moderator : Benjamin François)

With musical illustrations given live by the Jeune Chœur de Paris and its conductor Henri Chalet, the afternoon was dedicated to different musical interpretations of recurrent spiritual texts : *O Magnum Mysterium* (Tomas Luis de Victoria, Francis Poulenc, Morten Lauridsen) ; *O Sacrum Convivium* (Olivier Messiaen, Jean-Charles Gandrille) ; *Nunc Dimitis* (Felix Mendelssohn, Edith Canat de Chizy).

In different readings of a same work, in accordance with acoustic conditions, extreme tempo options can open extreme shades between absolute readability and feeling of eternity, as experienced in a confrontation of recordings of Messiaen's *O Magnum Mysterium*, conducted by Myung Whun Chung and George Guest. Out of one similar text, on similar words, very different associations can emerge, giving way to as many different musical feelings. The same is valid with spiritual texts set to music by different composers through the ages, following different stylistic and spiritual guidelines.



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Tuesday 24 January

The point of view of the performers (moderator : **Ariel Alonso**)

- « How difficult it is to speak about speech ! ». Such was one of the recurring questions of the event, as words can appear as much as a stimulus than as an obstacle to meaning. **Matthieu Romano**, founder conductor of Ensemble Aedes, along with Jean-François Chiamia, singer and founding member of accentus, wisely reminded the audience of the mere vocal sensuality of having to pronounce certain words, whatever their signification.
- **Lionel Sow**, conductor of the Chœur de l'Orchestre de Paris, a symphony chorus of more than 100 amateur singers, drew a line between the way some composers (Rossini, Poulenc...) consistently withdrew themselves from the hyper-doloristic content of certain text – « Stabat Mater », for example – while others (Dvorák, Szymanowski...) made the most of it.
- For **Rasmus Adrian**, general manager of the Danish music theatre Hotel Pro Forma, « making music more relevant » should be an all-time preoccupation for modern performers, in accordance with the role art should be playing within the social culture of discourse, when the old and exclusive distinction between high and low arts is no longer valid nor accepted.
- New media and communication links should help rethinking the role of art in society. But how should classical performers conceive their sonic role within a constant flux of cultural data in which visual aspects are so overwhelming... ? Reconnect the general public with the act of listening, and not just viewing, emerged as a key issue. Might words help in that field... ? How can performers add new layers of conscience (political as well as environmental) in the traditional form of concert ? How can they use classical music, an art without age, to reconnect people with the priceless legacy of the past centuries ?
- One sentence resounded over the debate : « As long as we have thirst and need for beauty, the Earth won't be destroyed ».

The point of view of the programmers (moderator : **Emmanuel Hondré**)

All four participants to this panel agreed on the usefulness of contextualization of the repertoire. An 'ancient vs. contemporary' kind of distinction between repertoires does not necessarily engage the same distinction between issues when it comes to what an audience will take from it.

- **Julien Caron**, general director of Festival International de La Chaise-Dieu (F), insists about how heritage buildings can help understanding the music they accommodate through life-size theatricalization (« stone cathedrals for sound cathedrals »).
- **Edouard Fouré Caul-Futy**, artistic coordinator at Orchestre de Paris, makes the most of the historic calendar, with the example of Tippett's *A Child of our Time* programmed in 2018 for the 80th anniversary of the Kristallnacht pogroms that took place throughout Nazi Germany on 9-10th Nov. 1938.
- For **Neil Wallace**, artistic director of the Koortiennale and programme director at De Doelen (NL), the horizon of the programmer of choral music – « in front of the ghastly world we're sucked into » - should be more inclusive of the general public, but without sacrifice in terms of artistic achievement, as was demonstrated by the Rundfunkchor's 'Human Requiem' project around Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem*. In the wake of recent political issues that have notably distorted the idea of people « not trust[ing] anymore what they can read but only what they can experience by themselves », Wallace is strongly reminded of the Christian 'Stabat Mater' when he sees the weeping mothers of Aleppo as the assumed figures of a 21st Century oratorio.



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New technologies (moderator : **Babette Greiner**)

- In an eloquent display of computerized / synthesized effects, **Axel Roebel**, researcher at IRCAM, reminds the audience that vocoders and synthesizers cannot reproduce emotional intonations. What makes the inner soul of the human voice – and of music at large - has to be added artificially through a process that questions the very act of music making.
- Dr **Annette Mossel**, researcher at the Technische Universität, Vienna, widens the scope of virtuality in a demonstration of what the ever-improving visual technologies could bring in the field of music making as well as in that of domestic reproduction.
- In a bemused and sceptical mood, questions arise in the audience about the eventual redundancy and superfluousness of performers in the very process of music making, when every sonic and visual aspects will be editable and corrigible in a near future through virtual and augmented reality, in accordance to prevailing moods and fashions....

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