

Notes on "The Notebooks"

1.

The lady welcoming me at the Janáček archive in Brno told me right away "you are neither the first nor the last person that will have to learn Czech to study Janáček". Well, I didn't.

A few months later, on the date of the premiere of this piece I still had my problems in getting the right pronunciations of the Czech transcriptions I had learned phonetically. I had hired a Czech person in Marseille willing to help me on this matter. I recorded him pronouncing all phrases and learned how to imitate them as closely as possible by repeating every single one over and over. The person helping me, on his turn had some problems as he was originally from the north of Czech Republic and many words in Janáček speech melodies were probably from a Moravian dialect spoken a century ago and he could not recognize all of them.

As it's often the case in my music I did repeat, obsessively at times, certain fragments, scraps of speech or speech-melody. Several people among the audience of the Janáček opera festival in Brno started wondering why I was repeating so many times those words and still in the wrong diction, so different from what may have been the original source back in the days. Fortunately many others understood what I was trying to do. Bringing back the past by resuscitating a hundred years old voice just by reading its musical notation as it was sketched onto a small piece of paper it's almost impossible without a hint of magic. They figured that the slightly twisted poetic strategy I was going for may have been less abstruse than it sounded like at first.

My original intuition was that the little speech melodies that Janáček had collected along three decades in the early 20th century carried with them a sort of sonic aura of a time or situation long gone, as if it had been possible to bottle up old sounds as one bottles up old wines and perfumes. This idea is nothing so special nowadays as we have portable recorders and we are used to pick up scraps of sound with our cell phones or zoom machines. Field recordings have entered contemporary music since a long while. One of my favorite composers, Luc Ferrari had used a lot of "bottled up" sound fragments harvested straight from the *réel* in his work and has called the results *musique anecdotique*.

Janáček had done something similar eighty years before but he had no recorder at hand and his scraps of sonic reality appeared a way more skeletal than Ferrari's.

Why was I delving into his archive of speech-melody scribbles ? Not a nationalist. Not writing in Janáček's style ("The Notebooks" does not certainly sound like Janáček although is entirely made out of melodies written by him). Not interested in glorifying Janáček's musical legacy's further. (I love his music but it certainly does not need me to be better celebrated and understood). Perhaps I was just moved by pure nostalgia for something I never experienced.

I was putting my feet , my emotions and my ears into a past era. A blurry one. A possibly not historical past where the less referentially binding properties of sound and hearing could make things quite ambiguous, dreamy I'd dare to say. A dreamlike state where a house is all houses, a mother everyone's mom and that glass of water a metonymy standing for a wide range of things from sipping from a tiny cup up to swimming right in the middle of an infuriated ocean.

For "The Notebooks" commissioned by the Janáček Festival in occasion of the 160th Janáček' Jubilee I started re-enacting the situations from which those speech melodies may have originated but i certainly did not use a realistic approach. Many of those annotated sounds were so unspecific and told us so little of the nature of the actual situation they came from. Still they carried something with them, a seed, an affection.

I was no imitator, no archeologist, at most I tried to be some sort of part-time shaman with a weird accent that by means of repetition and incantation evokes a long-gone reality in the head and the ears of the listeners. That past reality is gone and very far away in time and space as I ask listeners to travel a long way themselves to re-imagine it. Luckily some of my audience that night understood it and took the ride.

2.

As far as I know Leoš Janáček has been the first one to annotate the sound of spoken language with a certain consistency. I am grateful to the composer Peter Ablinger - another careful collector of speech-melodies - for pointing this out to me. Janáček had a serene obsession in annotating the melodic profiles of speech he overheard in the most diverse daily situation, from the most mundane to the most formal. He did this for his personal pleasure and inspiration and even though wax cylinder recorders have become available around the turn of the century and he had used them for his ethnomusicological research he kept using just pencil and paper and his memory. Janáček filled up a lot of tiny notebooks and scraps of paper with the annotated melodies of speech he heard and that had caught his attention. Scholars estimate that he may have left around 10.000 speech melodies of this kind scattered in many

notebook without any apparent order and that are now carefully kept in the archive of the Janáček Memorial in Brno.

Janáček way of annotating speech is "old" in the sense that he used traditional western notation, notes from the chromatic scale on a pentagram with the text written underneath and a few expressive and dynamic signs added to it. Seen on the paper it isn't different from any lyrical passage intended to be sung. And in fact it CAN be sung but we know it refers to speech and that this melodic fragment has (or CAN) be read in a subtly exceptional way, different than any other say operatic aria.

What Janáček did was to filter his perception of the sound of speech through a grid of signs that are used in his time to represent music. Through this grid and some approximation he allowed us today to open a window over a sound reality that is more than a century old. Still, this grid reflects an "old" idea of how sound can be listened to.

Around eighty years later the focus of western musical composition had moved from the chromatic scale and his combinations to the noisy nature of sound, the grain, the spectral content, and thereafter a new representation of the sound of speech, taking into account much more detailed phonetic, harmonic and microtonal aspects has been achieved with the substantial aid of spectral analysis.

Every time has his own way to listen to the sound of speech through a musical lens.

Speech and music share a lot of morphological aspects and far less cultural ones. They are both carved in vibrating air molecules and small and big resonating spaces and still are functioning on completely different levels, activating different

cultural processes and separated regions of the brain, fulfilling different tasks and functions.

I look back at the history of listening as it shifts from the filter of the tempered chromatic scale towards timbre, noise, phonetic and spectral content and even embracing silence as a fertile negative counterpart of sound and consider how this shift may inspire a new way of perceiving speech as musical sound.

Still I found fascinating to contemplate the way of listening that Janáček had, with his tiny notebooks and a pencil at hand. I am as charmed by the subjects he portrayed as I am by him as I can almost listen to him listening, as Peter Szendy would say.

Why was he doing it? Janáček which had left specific instructions in his testament in order to preserve and continue his research. But, in fact, what was this research about? I am not sure myself as I browse through the notebooks and travel across a kaleidoscope of sonic memories, voices of unknown people, children, farmers, animals all mixed together with no apparent logic besides the chronological order in which they were annotated. To me it appears like a huge and hugely fascinating poetic gesture carried out over decades.

In June, before coming to Brno to work on the speech melodies archive, my online horoscope said: "Aries: Have faith that the absurdity you experience can be used to your advantage." Surely Janáček took me into an exciting and somehow absurd time-travel in sound and left me with the feeling I have learned a big and unsettling music lesson even if it's hard to say exactly about what.

One thing that is for sure is that to this day I still have to learn

czech.

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