
CONVERSATIONS

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Jelena Novak*

Center for Study of the Sociology and Aesthetics of Music
Universidade NOVA de Lisboa

MUSIC AS AN AGGREGATE OF COLOURS A CONVERSATION WITH MARKO NIKODIJEVIĆ¹

It was spring 2001 and we were sitting in the concert hall of the Kolarac Endowment in Belgrade. I was attending a concert of contemporary music in my capacity as a music critic. I was listening and, as usual, making notes in my notebook. Among other works, the programme included *Exortus*, a work by Marko Nikodijević, an aspiring young composer and classmate of mine from the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. Both of us had balcony seats, not far from one another. The audience around us comprised mostly young and lively people, those who came late, those who managed to sneak in without a ticket, students, etc. During the interval, we were chatting with some other

* Author's contact information: artina@beotel.net

¹ The conversation took place via Zoom, in two sessions, on 25 May and 7 June 2021. The text was translated by Žarko Cvejić.

colleagues and Marko asked me what I'd written down about his piece. I refused to divulge that before my review came out and then there was this memorable little scene wherein Marko and I, half-jokingly but partly also in earnest, started a wrestling match over my notepad. The basic contours of my interest in his music were already clearly delineated.



Marko Nikodijević

It's been 20 years since then, which have seen Nikodijević build a dazzling international career. I will map only a few key points from his creative biography. He studied composition in Belgrade with Srđan Hofman and Zoran Erić, before earning a graduate degree in composition from Stuttgart, where he studied with Marco Stroppa. He also studied certain areas of mathematics and physics, therefore his interest in fractals in his music is hardly surprising. He pursued further training in composition courses and seminars in Apeldoorn, Wisby, Weimar, Amsterdam, Salzwedel, and Baden-Baden. Nikodijević has won several major composition prizes and awards: at the International Young Composers Meeting in Apeldoorn; the prestigious Gaudeamus Award at the Gaudeamus Music Week composers' competition in the Netherlands; at the 3rd Brandenburg Biennial; and at the UNESCO Rostrum of Composers. In 2013, he was awarded by the Ernst von Siemens Music Foundation and in 2014 he won the Deutscher Musikautorenpreis in the new

talents category. Among other ensembles, his music has been performed by the Ives Ensemble, Nieuw Ensemble, Ensemble Modern, Nouvel Ensemble Modern, Ensemble Intercontemporain, Klangforum Wien, musikFabrik, Ensemble Insomnio, London Sinfonietta, and ASKO/Schönberg Ensemble, as well as the following orchestras, among others: the London Symphony Orchestra, Rundfunksinfonieorchester Berlin, ORF-Symphonie Orchester Wien, Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra, Brandenburger Symphoniker, SWR Symphonieorchester, Philharmonie de Paris, Collegium Novum Zurich, and Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra. Some of the leading festivals of contemporary music have repeatedly featured his works, such as the Gaudeamus Music Week (in 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2012), musikprotokoll im steirischen herbst (2005, 2011, 2012, 2017), Contemporary Music Festival in Huddersfield (2005), World New Music Festival Stuttgart (2006), Warsaw Autumn (2010), musica Strasbourg (2011), MATA New York (2011), Donaueschinger Musiktage (2012, 2020), ars nova (2013), Münchner Biennale (2014), and Lucerne Festival (2018).²

Nikodijević's piece for symphony orchestra *cvetić, kućica.../la lugubre gondola: funeral music after franz liszt – in memoriam* (2009), which won him the Gaudeamus Award in 2010, achieved a well-deserved breakthrough in improving his oeuvre's visibility on the international music scene. In this work he "treated Liszt's score like a kind of 'archive' of sorrowful motives. He imported Liszt's motives in his composition randomly, remediated them, developed them, deconstructed them, disfigured them, listened to them again and again, carefully, to finally see if and how they would reflect sadness in the new environment".³ This type of "close reading" and almost fractal observation and rethinking of carefully selected specific musical utterances from the past may be detected in almost every score by Nikodijević.

In 2013/14 Nikodijević wrote his first opera, a chamber work titled *VIVIER: Ein Nachtprotokoll*, which premièred at the Munich Biennale. In this opera, Nikodijević focused on the character and oeuvre of the Canadian composer Claude Vivier, a sort of queer icon in contemporary classical music. He was an author endowed with a striking musical language, which is amply

² More detailed information about Nikodijević's biography, works, awards, and performances of his works may be found at his publisher Sikorski's website: https://www.sikorski.de/5692/en/nikodijevic_marko.html, accessed: 2021-06-08.

³ See: Jelena Novak, "Politics of Sadness: Little Flower, Refrigerator Lorry, Death and Symphonic Tradition", *International Journal for Music New Sound*, 38, II/2011, https://www.newsound.org.rs/pdf/en/ns38/New_Sound_38.65-75.pdf, accessed: 2021-06-08.

felt throughout Nikodijević's operatic score, while all the characters in the opera are male.⁴ Nikodijević's fascination with Vivier's life and works had already manifested itself much earlier in his oeuvre, in his *Chambres de ténèbres/tombeau de Claude Vivier* (2005/2007–2009/2012).⁵

His particular approach to musical dramaturgy and conception of music in combination with other media were bound to get Nikodijević involved in some interesting interdisciplinary collaborations. Thus in 2018, together with the artist, composer, and programmer Robert Henke, he developed a work titled *From Within...* The piece features an orchestra making music on an almost entirely dark stage, their sounds mixing with those of electronic music, while the stage also features a light installation/sculpture by Henke, whose dynamic generates a sort of counterpoint with the sounds produced on the stage. The project was commissioned by the Ensemble intercontemporain and IRCAM, with Henke and Nikodijević brought together by "their common interest in the evolution of timbre, in music as sonic state, in transitions, and sudden fractures. They both are obsessed with details as well as with grand and majestic gestures".⁶ More recently still, Luka Kozlovački and Marko Nikodijević took part in a three-week-long series of musical performances under the auspices of Ilya Khrzanovsky's controversial, monumental, and immersive installation *DAU*, staged in Paris in 2019. "We played various genres of electronics, from avant-garde noise to improvisations with the Musica Eterna women's choir using plainsong snippets from Hildegard von Bingen, we played with Brian Eno, we made some ambiance sets, we mixed techno and minimalism with Stravinsky and turbofolk".⁷ The opening and closing musical performances at *DAU* were led by Nikodijević and Kozlovački.

Recently, Nikodijević has found himself at the centre of the international operatic, musical, and more broadly artistic scene thanks to his collaboration

⁴ For more detail about this work, see: Jelena Novak, "Vivier Reenacted: Singing beyond Masculine", *International Journal of Music New Sound*, 45, 1/2015, 139–150. Available at: <https://www.newsound.org.rs/pdf/en/ns45/11Novak.pdf>, accessed: 2021-06-07.

⁵ See: Jelena Novak, "A Queer Protocol of Homage: *Chambres de ténèbres/tombeau de Claude Vivier* by Marko Nikodijević", *International Journal of Music New Sound*, 29, 1/2007, 59–68. <https://www.newsound.org.rs/pdf/en/ns29/8.%20Jelena%20Novak.pdf>, accessed: 2021-06-08.

⁶ Quoted from https://roberthenke.com/concerts/from_within.html, accessed: 2021-06-09.

⁷ E-mail correspondence with Marko Nikodijević, 2021-06-09.

with Marina Abramović on her *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* project. This long-awaited and, owing to the current pandemic, much deferred opera by Abramović finally saw its world première on 1 September 2020 at the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich. It was performed live as well as streamed online.⁸ Like a sort of operatic curator, Abramović had selected seven operatic roles and individual arias that Maria Callas had made her own. Those arias, which constitute key points in Callas's career, were used in this work to anchor the musical skeleton of a new operatic work. Each one of its seven scenes shows a heroine dying – of tuberculosis, of *seppuku*, insanity, forced to leap to her own death, strangled, stabbed, or burnt to death. The introductory music as well as that of the final scene, “Death No. 8”, that of Maria Callas herself, was written by Marko Nikodijević, while the electronic interludes separating the readymade arias were jointly made by Nikodijević and the sound designer Luka Kozlovački.

Each aria is performed by a different singer. They all belong to the leading female roles from the following operas: *La traviata*, *Otello* (Giuseppe Verdi), *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly* (Giacomo Puccini), *Carmen* (Georges Bizet), *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Gaetano Donizetti), and *Norma* (Vincenzo Bellini). While the singer performs her aria on the stage, a short silent film (directed by Nabil Elderkin) is screened behind her. These films feature Abramović and the actor Willem Dafoe in surreal, spectacular, sometimes even absurd scenes, commenting on these operatic deaths (for instance, during Bizet's *Habañera*, we see Marina Abramović playing a bull in a massive red outfit and Dafoe trying to restrain her with rope). Although it is music that lends structure to this performance, it is still dominated by the viscosity of the moving images, while the arias unexpectedly turn into a series of film music excerpts.⁹

A keyword regarding Nikodijević's Introduction to *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* is reverberation, a repetitive kind of music, multilayered, masterfully orchestrated, alluring and intimidating at once, deceptive. One hears bells tolling, but these bells both sound and do not sound like bells, these are bells

⁸ The première of 1 September 2020 was followed by several live performances in front of a reduced audience, in line with pandemic regulations. For this purpose, the original score was re-orchestrated to reduce the number of performers. On 5 September 2020 a live stream was made available on the Internet, which remained freely available worldwide until 7 October 2020.

⁹ For more detail on this performance see my review of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* on its world première: “Operski agregat uživo” (An Opera Aggregate Live), *Vreme*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=1819592>, accessed: 2021-06-08.

with something else added to them, a shadow, a virus. To whom, for whom the bells toll, are they funeral bells, or wedding bells? These bells serve to warn and raise the tension, tuning the listener's ear for what comes next. At the same time, this music is also cinematic, almost invoking moving images. A melancholic oboe solo, in dialogue with bells echoing, approximates a voice, as though gesticulating and speaking in an obscure language. The tolling is also permeated by motives from the arias we hear later on in the opera. They behave like pigments, invariably mixing and growing into a single tissue, amalgam, or aggregate.

The opera *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* awaits further performances at the Paris Opéra Garnier and then in Naples, Athens, and Berlin. We used it as an occasion for a conversation with Marko Nikodijević, with questions about using the voice, vocality, singing, operatic representation, and fascination with death opening paths toward discussing these poetic coordinates across his oeuvre as a whole.

How did you get involved in Marina Abramović's 7 Deaths of Maria Callas in the first place and what form did this collaboration take? What is your view today of the respective positions of the director, operatic curator, and composer in the constellation of making a contemporary operatic work? The hierarchy of these roles has changed significantly, when you compare it to their relations in the past.

Marina had this life dream of a project focused on Maria Callas. It was an obsession of hers spanning several decades. So, there is death, there is Maria Callas, the role of a mother, relations with men, the relationship between a man and a woman and that between a woman artist and a man. A number of different obsessions overlapped there, all of which had been leitmotifs in her art. In fact, the final idea preceding the opera involved seven different films by seven different directors. And then, as it tends to happen, one of the directors pulled out, then another, then there were the exorbitant expenses that such a production would entail, etc. But Marina wouldn't let go of that idea. Nikolaus Bachler, the director of the Bavarian Opera, wanted Marina to stage Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* there. She wasn't interested in that, but she suggested her Maria Callas idea, which Bachler accepted straight away. Initially, Teo Currentzis was on the creative team as well and Teodor and Nikolaus suggested that Marina and I should meet and that I could compose music for the project.

Since I had already worked on several projects involving other artists, I was accustomed to these kinds of collaborations where individual “jurisdictions” are not strictly delineated. It is a different matter to compose music for a ballet, which the choreographer then uses to fashion her own expression in dance – there, the division of work is clear. *7 Deaths* is a project conceived in the spirit of multimedia permeations. In such a project, the divisions are often neither clear nor possible, depending on how comprehensive each author’s approach is. Such divisions may be possible in the movie industry, where the mechanisms of production are highly industrialized and depend on running processes involving a large number of participants within a strict timeframe. Compared to the mechanics of producing a film, in terms of technical complexity, the mechanism of an opera – while extremely big for the performing arts world – is still significantly less complex.

I’ve learnt from experience that unless there’s mutual chemistry in the first five minutes, the collaboration won’t work. I think that this lack of creative chemistry also mars most of these trendy projects: putting together the biggest names possible, with complicated schedules and obligations, and the impossibility of finding a model for continual collaboration on a project. It is a lot easier to improvise within an intimate circle of people.

It was clear to me from the outset that I had to believe in the project the way Marina had imagined it. You need to have a fundamental level of trust in the people you’re working with. Our ideas must not morph into changing other people’s conceptual and artistic ideas at will – that gives rise to a sort of mutual sabotaging and then the project is dead. Marina is old, modernist school – we stick to the concept with an ice-cold resolve no matter what, and of course, that helps.

By the way, soon after its emergence in the early 17th century, operatic music quickly began developing, whereas staging as a separate sort of artistic contribution emerged only much later. As an authorial type of work, staging was only seriously established with the advent of film. The traditional journey of making an opera, from the libretto via the score to a staged performance is a thing of the past.

How was it decided that you would write for the opening and final scene, as well as the interludes?

It was clear from the beginning that it would be those seven roles. We had this clear bipartite idea. The joints, the interludes, have yet to be finalized. Luka

(Kozlovački) and I will put together another version for the upcoming performances. For the first version of the interludes we used an entirely different text. The idea was that it should be a drastically distanced kind of text. It worked well as an idea, but it didn't work in practice. It seemed didactic. The text was supposed to be "dry", a sort of Wikipedia abstract preceding each one of these deaths, a sort of anti-romantic turn away from it. Marina wanted these texts to be anti-romantic, but in fact they lacked a more poetic quality, and this quality was in the omitted bits, in that which would enable us to observe the metaphor in between the missing parts. This was impossible to put together poetically, as a dramaturgy comprising seamless transitions from three-dimensional "clouds" into cinematic deaths. It is impossible to explain why some things work or don't work, except that it becomes intuitively clear when something isn't working, or when it should be exactly this or that way.

How did you feel within the romantic context of this operatic tissue? I suppose it must've also been a sort of challenge and that a sort of distance was necessary, although, on the other hand, the selected Romantic arias do constitute the core of the work itself.

In principle, I view that as an *objet trouvé*, a found object, a postcard from the past. Although I'm not exactly a fan of Italian verismo, I don't have a negative relationship with the past. This kind of aesthetic rejection of the 19th century, like in the 1970s, it's outdated today. It is an empty gesture, fit for a contemporary music festival from 50 years ago. It is outmoded today. I have no issues with using incongruent musical materials. Maybe it's the impact of *musique concrète* and techno music, this idea of sampled history.

Presumably it was Marina Abramović who chose those seven arias, you had no say about the selection?

It was clear from the outset that it would be those seven roles, because they involve these seven prototypical deaths. On the one hand, the selected music had left a mark on Maria Callas's career onstage (*Norma*, *Butterfly*, *Lucia*, *Tosca*), or Callas made famous recordings of those arias (*Carmen* – "Habañera", *Desdemona* – "Ave Maria"). But this music constitutes more than just historical material from Callas's repertoire. It is also an avatar of an entire operatic world. That is why each one of these seven cinematic deaths takes the "prototypical" death of its character and produces a cinematic counterpoint to its symbolic performativity, not at the actual point in the opera where

the heroine dies, but precisely with the aria that forms the “lyrical” core of the operatic score in question.

There were a few more arias that would’ve been perhaps more prototypical of Maria Callas, for example, *Medea* or *La Gioconda*. But it wouldn’t be the same kind of feminine dying. Callas never performed Desdemona onstage, there’s only an audio recording of that, and the same goes for Carmen. For us she’s a hologram. There are very few living witnesses today of Maria Callas performing onstage, because she retired already in 1965. Our image of Callas is a two-dimensional picture, an audio and video recording.

When I saw it, 7 Deaths made me remember that famous scene from Singing in the Rain, featuring two women onstage, one in front of the curtain, the other behind it. The visible woman is lipsynching, borrowing her voice from the “invisible” singer. However, the curtain suddenly rises and the game is up. I connected that sequence with Marina and Maria in this project, especially regarding the final scene, featuring Marina Abramović onstage in a golden dress. She performs, voiceless, the aria “Casta Diva”, “through” the voice of Maria Callas, which is heard from a recording. For me, this was the most dramatic moment in the opera. This problematization of the relationship between the singing body and the singing voice is always very important in opera. What do you think about it?

Our notion of opera as a bourgeois creature is deceptive. It harbours a sort of absurdity in itself: orders are issued by singing, politics is discussed in duets, people dance around graves, and die whilst delivering a melodic line. This kind of absurdity is immanent to the medium itself, located as it is in the counterpoint between the staged tableau and the musical and sung events taking place on the stage, which is unique to opera and found in no other media.

Typically, in opera, the relationship between the body and voice occupies a “blind spot”. It is an invisible/visible place that we accept, without wondering how it’s possible that we accept something so absurd without question. For me, opera is closer, even, in that absurd sense, to the art of the circus than to cinema, for instance, even though the history of cinema and that of opera are often viewed in a sort of parallel line.

This type of representation possesses a sort of customariness that convinces you, and not only does it convince you, but it also touches you emotionally. I, too, can’t understand why this “improbability” of opera, contrary to every

expectation, seems both impossible and unrealistically real, so real that it provokes a deep emotional reaction in us. That is the secret behind a century and a half of worshipping and critiquing Wagner's *Ring*. The imaginary language in the music of Claude Vivier speaks to us "loud and clear", even though it makes no sense semantically.

More than a decade ago, in Rijeka, I was introduced to the composer Ivo Malec; we talked about art, and then he remarked, referring to my interest in contemporary opera, that these days singing was passé, that the time when people had sung about things was behind us, that now it was out of place. I found that remark unexpected, as well as interesting. Why sing about anything? Do you ever think about that when you're working on an opera or vocal piece?

Singing is a broad category. The music of Webern is performed by singing; what Björk does is likewise singing, and the same goes for Lepa Brena. Schoenberg's *Sprechgesang*, reductiveness in terms of melodic utterance or vocal timbre, or approaching speech, and even denaturalised sounds like in (Georges) Aperghis – all of that stuff is singing, too. I find rap music deeply fascinating, not only as a socio-critical and sub-cultural phenomenon that has conquered the mainstream, but chiefly in terms of its musical structures: its virtuosic use of rhythm and the rhythmicity of words, composing rhymes in a stylised kind of speech/pronunciation. There is no doubt that its logic of form, although ostensibly affecting primarily its textual semantics, is essentially musical, because it focuses on rhythm and the musical structures that thereby emerge. For sure, it isn't the *Lied* tradition of Schubert, but it is a form of vocal expression and music, just like Tibetan throat singing and Chinese opera. Perhaps it is above all just mindboggling how broad this range of various kinds of singing is, from the Carpathians, via Georgian two-part singing, to the Mongols and Aborigines. The more isolated the community is, the more peculiar is its singing, beyond the context of the Western European mainstream. Whatever way people use to communicate with their voices – that's singing.

In your opera VIVIER. Ein Nachtprotokoll, the Vivier character is sung by a countertenor. How do you actually "allocate" specific vocal types to your characters? How do you make this interesting decision?

There are several layers there, several notions and ideas of sound that come beforehand. That chamber opera is orchestrated without any "high" instru-

ments such as violins, flutes, oboes, trumpets. This was a conscious reduction that enabled me to produce an entirely different kind of orchestral “image”. It is a kind of deliberate reduction, reductionism as a paradoxical means of generating complexity. It’s similar to the combinatorics of 1950s structural painters and their working with a few primary colours: a pixel of green, a pixel of yellow, a pixel of blue, and a pixel of red each, and a huge number of combinations may be obtained from those four colours. I pre-compose by excluding things because composing is not about what you add up but what you exclude.

So voice is one of the colours forming the sound image of an opera?

Yes, a colour, whether it’s female or male, whether it’s falsetto or a true counter-tenor, depending on the range that is required. I love the human voice. For instance, I’ve written music for soprano and orchestra...

Yes, the piece Abgesang – what is the meaning of its title?

Abgesang means “the final stanza”. It is a short and subtle poem resembling a haiku, by the Hungarian poet Mátyás Molcer, which roughly translates as follows: “grass is turning yellow on unmarked graves, when they mix the bones, they will be mixing the bones again, on unmarked graves grass will be turning yellow again”.

Anna Sohn’s rendering of that piece is peculiar by virtue of her dark, somewhat queer vocal timbre. There are theorists who argue that the voice has no gender, but that instead it’s gendered by culture. In that sense I found the voice of this singer interesting.¹⁰

Anna Sohn is a Puccinian soprano. It’s a matter of vocal range. For me, the difference in timbre between a mezzosoprano and a soprano is something rather dramatic, while in terms of range they’re quite close to each other. The difference between the lower and upper *passaggio* of a mezzosoprano and a soprano is a major second, but in terms of timbre, they constitute two quite different vocal types. At the same time, the adoption of vocal techniques from historically informed practices has opened our ears to a different kind of vocal sound. In a historically informed variant of singing Monteverdi

¹⁰ A recording of this performance is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rymh65mPcnM>, accessed: 2021-06-09. The orchestra, Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin, was led by Brad Lubman.

would be subjected to questions such as “what kind of ornaments are those?”, “what kind of vocal articulation, vibrato, dynamics, textual articulation”, and so on. Using the Internet for 30 years now has changed our view of the totality of history. Everything is always and permanently here, in an eternal now.

That's why exclusions are so important.

Probably.

Concerning the voice again, there is an interesting reference you inserted in your piece GHB/Tanzaggregat, involving the song Lela Vranjanka (“Lela from Vranje”). In Serbia, that song has become part of its folk heritage and it's often sung at informal celebrations and gatherings. The vocality of that material is striking; in your piece, you address it in a virtuosic way. How did you decide to make that reference?

I think that singing is above all a type of horizontal thinking. So, not that kind of chordal or contrapuntal relationship involving lines or points, but first and foremost a horizontal axis. For us, in Mozart's Clarinet Concerto, the clarinet sings. Singing is not only that which relates to a voice, or something that we might repeat, but above all a certain way the material unfolds.

What is Vranjanka doing in GHB/Tanzaggregat?

Why not have her there? I have an obsession for Khachaturian (Арам Ильич Хачатурян). Khachaturian's early ballets, for instance *Gayaneh...*, this is one of my favourite pieces, its orchestration is divine, everything in it is opulent, like music in Hollywood noir films, but on crystal meth. It's that kind of aesthetic, in Soviet ballet, like Soviet cartoons, ultra Technicolor, the experience of a dazzling intensity of colours. In Khachaturian, Armenian folklore plays a constructive role, this is a constitutive similarity, folk material with rather peculiar rhythmic and melodic constructions that unfold in quasi-ostinato arcs. For me, that connects several different worlds – that of folk musical heritage and that of the rhythm machine, a memory “frozen” in a sample, subjected to permanent simple algorithmic operations. It is simple fractals recursively sprouting out of reductive cores. They spawn interesting compounds and materials.

One of the key moments in 7 Deaths involves a record player onstage. When the “chambermaids”, after Maria Callas's death, are cleaning her flat, they turn

on the record player and at that moment you hear something that, to me, sounded like GHB/Tanzaggregat. We're pulled into a loop, which works awesome in dramaturgical terms, suggesting an unstoppable whirl, not only in Maria's, but also in Marina's life and works alike. Like in Hitchcock's Vertigo, that loop suddenly sets the whole story of the opera spinning.

The whole of "Death No. 8" is a sort of fantasia involving bits and motives from "Casta Diva", while the loop itself is half a bar from the choral part, when the choir sings "e senza vel". Pronounced quickly, "e senza, e senza, e senza, e senza...", it begins to sound like *essenza*, fading out... Against the sonic background of that raggedy loop, which dissolves in a reverb and the noise produced by the gramophone needle, Marina appears as Maria, wearing a golden dress on the very ramp of the theatre stage, two steps away from the orchestra "pit". From the outset, we were clear about how the opera would end: with an excerpt from a recording of "Casta Diva", as its dramaturgical focus, starting and ending point.

Something that inevitably informs Seven Deaths as well as other pieces of yours is the problematization of death. Death, grief, sorrow are subjects you seldom turn away from. Cvetić, kućica... La lugubre gondola carries a reference to tragic deaths in the conflicts that took place during Milošević's rule in Serbia. The piece includes a reference to Edgar Allan Poe and his line that reads "Death looks gigantically down". In your first opera, you deal with the death of the composer Claude Vivier and in that piece there is also a reference to Tchaikovsky and an opera about death that he wanted to write. In Abgesang there is grass turning yellow on graves... In the opening of Seven Deaths of Maria Callas there is some kind of tolling coming from the orchestra; I heard them as funeral bells, and I wondered for whom exactly those bells tolled...

Bells and the tolling of bells are the type of sound that most frequently reappears in my music and in some sense I always return to them. I could listen to the sound of bells for hours on end; I'm impressed by that kind of complexity and overall harmony of resonances. It's a symbolically and acoustically unique sound, sound as a religious symbol. Death has the metaphysical dimension of an unfathomable and insurmountable frontier. Metaphysical horizons beyond which we cannot see are an eternal source of fascination.

You mentioned you were working on a new music theatre project?

Yes, I'm working now with Philippe Parreno on a monumental project for next year's Wiener Festwochen. It's an operatic installation with a semantic text, but without live voices. There will be recorded and synthesised voices, the orchestra will imitate speech, and there will be text, which will appear as rhythmical, visual, as the sound of speech reiterated by the orchestra. The voice is made into a virtual medium, it comes out not from the throat, but is synthesised instead by the orchestra, or by means of electronics, or through some sort of inter-synthesis of different electronic, acoustic, and sampled materials.

Theoretical discussions of the voice as an indicator of the post-human are still relatively rare. Through the process of creating a voice, but beyond a human body, questions arise as to what it means to be a human today and how asking such questions today is reformulating the relationship between humans and machines, humans and animals, humans and others.

When we're reading a text, a spoken text, semantic speech, when we're reading it without pronouncing it, we can hear it inside us. It doesn't have to be spoken, but we can hear its sound. We have this abstract symbolism for writing down phonetic speech. "Silent" reading is impossible. Those are fascinating mechanisms. That applies to semantic speech. When you're only looking at a character or symbol of sorts, you don't hear it inside, but if you see "head", at that moment you kind of hear that word with your internal ear. It is entirely impossible to silence that internal hearing. The moment you come to know the semantics of a language, you can always hear it.

In your pieces you often "talk" to other authors and their musics. I'll mention Gesualdo, Khachaturian, Vivier... As though you were engaging in a permanent conversation with a music history archive?

When you're young and only starting to compose, you encounter the notion of modernist ascetics and puritanism, which suggest working only with materials that are pure and intact. Twentieth-century movements such as dodecaphony and serialism were something that was already purified in itself. Unfortunately, there is too much insistence on the notion that it must be something completely personal and unique. Our memory is littered with the past. I realised that for me, this presumption that composition should omit the past was not the right way to go, that I shouldn't just trample on that history and pave it over. On the contrary, I passionately accept every hyperlink that opens up in front of me. I have a positive outlook on the past. The past

never was something that one should transcend and leave by the wayside, because the past is alive, it lives through our memories. That gives rise to hyper-referentiality, the Borgesian notion of library, a world of hyperlinks.

How do you fill your “archive”? When you’re still studying, you automatically amass your archives of knowledge. Later on, we all develop our own different mechanisms for expanding our “archives”. How do you open new chapters in your “archives”?

There are two things. One is longterm obsessions, the composers I keep reverting to, or even compositions I keep returning to, or certain kinds of compositional procedures that I keep revisiting. I’m fascinated by unique composers, for instance Gesualdo, Vivier, Carl Orff. These are composers who are seemingly sort of outside of history, as though they couldn’t fit into it. Like they’re stuck in a blind alley, a road that no one is happy to take. Even though there is this wonderful six-lane highway, if we took a dusty dirt road, we could see things that we’ve never seen before. Although they seem surrounded by a thick forest, those roads are not only passable, but also lead to some unexpected directions.

Would you like to mention some of those pieces or compositional procedures to which you’re happy to return? You already mentioned Khachaturian and his early ballets...

Two pieces by Gesualdo to which I’ve often turned are his madrigal *Moro, lasso* and motet *O vos omnes*. Works that often provoke me are, let’s say, Orff’s late antiquity operas *Antigona* and *Oedipus der Tyrann* and especially his last work, the apocalyptic oratorio *De temporum fine comoedia*, late Sibelius, the sacred works of the Baroque master Jan Dismas Zelenka. That is really fascinating music.

A matter that must also be mentioned is your peculiar treatment of the symphony orchestra. The decisiveness and courage with which you approach this type of ensemble, the ability to keep pushing the limits of symphonic music are all palpable in your works. Your orchestration procedures, which are often inseparable from the flow of your musical ideas, are often unusual and “garish”, to borrow the term you used for Soviet cartoons. The symphony orchestra is still your favourite instrument?

It's not only my favourite instrument, but also my most natural instrument, the easiest means of expression for me. I was 36 when I finally wrote my first string quartet, after five or six attempts. I think I really conquered the string quartet as a medium (laughs).

I presume that your first encounter with an orchestra was "love at first sight"?

My first encounter with an orchestra was when I was a kid, playing in my music school orchestra. Our house was always full of orchestral music records. From my early childhood I listened to music and my favourite was that world of orchestral music, the most comprehensive and natural medium of expression as far as I'm concerned. After a while I realised that the way orchestral musicians play is a social construct, because they do it together. The choral leading of string parts yields a wholly different kind of playing together than what goes on, say, in a string quartet or solo piano. I don't think that the world of symphonic music is exhausted. I don't think that any medium can be exhausted. In principle, media are inexhaustible, that's why every medium comes back in full bloom every once in a while. For example, after 200 years, the harpsichord has returned as a legitimate, interesting, and compositionally provocative medium. The harpsichord had gone out of fashion because acoustic relations in the 18th and 19th century pushed it aside. However, the harpsichord has not run out of things to say, far from it.

Do you view combining electronic sounds with that of a symphony orchestra as a sort of extension of the symphonic sound, or as an additional palette of colours that you use?

I think it is really an extension of that medium. And more generally, when electronic music appears in the context of vocal or instrumental music, so when it's not only music coming out of speakers, this is a fundamental sort of extension of one's field of activity. An enormous sound palette opens up, the possibility of using and creating your sound space differently, of transforming the sound of instruments or voices in real time. It is an extreme extension of the medium. The notion of using electronic music only as a sort of glazing on top of the orchestra is artistically and musically misguided. Electronics and orchestra are two authentic and autonomous media that come together in harmony to create an entirely new world.

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