

HCMF// 2010: JUSTE JANULYTE – MEASURING HER PACE WITH SANDGLASSES

Justė Janulytė, a Lithuanian composer now living in Milan, Italy, first came into public view in 2004 to win the nomination of the year's best chamber composition at the competition of the Lithuanian Composers' Union (with White Music for 15 strings). She has studied at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre (graduating in 2006), as well as at the Milan Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory.

Her music was performed in Europe, USA and Canada, by Teatro La Fenice Symphony and Gothenburg Symphony Orchestras, French Flute Orchestra, Riga Sinfonietta, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, Ensemble Bit20 (Norway), Estonian Philharmonic and Danish Radio choirs, Quasar (Montreal) and Xasax (Paris) saxophone quartets, cellists Anton Lukoszevics (England) and Francesco Dillon (Italy), and others. Her list of achievements includes two more prizes at the competition of the Lithuanian Composers' Union (in 2008 and 2010), and the first prize at the UNESCO International Rostrum of Composers in Paris, in the category of young composers (in 2009, for Aquarelle for mixed choir).

The closing concert of hcmf// 2010 (on Sunday 28 November) presents Janulytė's most recent opus - Sandglasses for cello quartet, live electronics and the installation of video, lights and tulle, created together with the Italian video artist Luca Scarzella.

Your life spans between two cultures. Born and bred in Vilnius, you now call Milan your home. To which musical space, Lithuanian or Italian, you feel tied more closely as a composer?

Moving to Milan appeared to be almost fatal to me and it took several years. It started with a dream of studying at the Verdi Conservatory which I wanted to join initially because Giacomo Puccini, the first composer which I consciously became fond of, studied there and later because I got acquainted to its school of composition, now quite powerful, through different creative workshops. Eventually, it was not because of professional matters why this country has become my home. I realised, after having moved to this city, that the concept of 'home', or a geographic dependence in general, effectively does not change much in me as a composer because it neither gives me something nor takes anything from me. At first, I was worried about losing the source of vital energy to keep my identity staying away from my native Vilnius where I had

spent 25 years living in the same street. However, now I see that a certain cultural and mental genetics is pretty well safeguarded from any influences, it even becomes stronger, tempered and more conscious in a new environment. The constant feeling of being on a trip and far from home makes responsiveness more subtle and sometimes opens up entirely new channels susceptible to creative impulses.

What are your experiences in Milan? Are Italians open enough to allow foreigners into their musical space?

The studies at the Milan Conservatory were useful in terms of developing my craft. A considerable attention was paid to the traditions of composition and the possibilities of their transformation pointing to the significance of their continuity which has helped to quench the euphoria of the 'invention of a bicycle'. The cult of a particular precision in the score is prevailing, which means that the aleatoric attitude towards the notation, quite common among Lithuanian composers, is far from welcome here. Chances of haphazardness allowed by a composer are treated as ill-realised ideas, primitivism or a kind of score-weed that grows uncontrolled on a ground which has not been cultivated to the required extent. I would not say, however, that I found a hospitable atmosphere to ripen the aesthetic values which I stand for, such as statics or different forms of minimalism, close even to a radical purism, which are so beloved in the Baltic countries. I felt disquieted about the premiere of my symphonic piece, *Textile*, during the Venice Biennale in 2008 knowing that it was quite common among the Italian audiences to boo the premieres they found not satisfying. *Textile*, performed by the Teatro La Fenice Symphony Orchestra and conducted by Eliahu Inbal, is a single metamorphosis of registers, timbres and harmonies which lasts for nine minutes and thus hardly meets the standards of a decent symphonic piece. Despite that, and in some instances exactly because of that, the composition has received excellent reviews as well as listeners' compliments. I am glad that Mr Eliahu Inbal, the artistic director of the La Fenice theatre, liked the piece and included it in the theatre's repertoire for symphonic concerts. Eventually, this composition won the first prize as the best symphonic piece at the annual competition by the Lithuanian Composers' Union in 2008.

Staying between the two countries opens up more professional opportunities, doesn't it?

Individualistic origin of composer's work, especially of the one who does not write for theatre and cinema and, in other words, does not work for a troupe or an institution, turns his or her belonging to this or that community more into a psychological state of mind rather than into real career prospects.

It is difficult to determine the factors that create composer's identity. I believe

these days everything is mixed and merged in arts to the extent that national identity often becomes a speculation comparable to the attempts of describing differences between the masculine and feminine creativity. I suppose I am creating the musical visions which, leaving aside the inevitable temperament of my nature, are not connected directly either to a place or to its national traditions. Despite that, it is no less important to me to call myself a Lithuanian composer or, to be more precise, a composer from Vilnius.

To what extent is the originality of your creation important to you?

Originality is important but not because of my wish to show up externally or to create new aesthetics. It is rather the way of searching for a certain innermost genetic originality and authenticity in the language of music. I strive at creating and managing musical expression from the smallest details, the initial DNA of the piece, to grow the entire composition up as a coral from one single gesture rather than by drawing the dramatic scheme of the piece and later filling it with more or less occasional materials or certain techniques, already used by other people or by myself. Differently from a sculptor, who already has the substance of his creation and whose task, in a primitive way of thinking, lays merely in bestowing the form to it, a composer must create both the substance and the form of its placement in space. In other words, he has to create water, glass and a cup from scratch. Perhaps the true and the fairest creation is electronic, when a composer generates the timbre of sound himself instead of using the already existing instruments of a symphony orchestra with their limited technical capabilities and traditions of handling.

Many of your pieces are written for ‘monochromatic’ ensembles (15 strings, 2 pianos, 4 or even 24 flutes, etc). Why is this?

Monochromatic ensembles, which I keep choosing from my early pieces, have already become an integral quality of my musical aesthetics, related not only to the timbral sound of my music, but also to the use of some particular textures, the density and at the same time coherence of which couldn't be obtained by ensembles or orchestras consisting of different instruments. Single instruments in my pieces are not being individualised, but the whole ensemble is rather handled as a utopian solo instrument with extended ranges, textural and other potentialities, like e.g. would have a 24-voiced flute or a 60-string cello.

The titles of some of your works resemble excerpts from poetic texts. What is their function and relationship with the music itself? Is it possible that they are not really titles in their traditional sense, but rather an additional layer of meaning that extends music instead of just naming it? The titles of my pieces, even though they do indeed sound poetic, usually reflect the constructive idea realised in the composition. For example, in *White Music* the idea of the formation of white colour in nature is unfolded, in *Let's Talk About Shadows* certain textural, dynamic and harmonic metaphors of shadows are developed, while *Breathing Music* imitates the periodic rhythm of breathing, and so forth. Titles are important and inseparable from the music, they verbalise its intentions, as subjective and open to interpretations as they could be.

One of your pieces has a very long title - Who has traced the abyss of July night, how many miles does it take to dart downwards to the hollow, where nothing else happens...? Is it perhaps worth keeping silence at all rather than creating music 'about' silence?

Absolute silence, as a utopia, is probably the perfect example of 'stylistic purity'. Paradoxically, there are no silences or rests in my music. I like creating the textures which sound as if holding a pedal pressed down or a percussion resonating after being hit. This means I am still trapped inside the 'phobia of empty spaces' which one professor of the Milan Conservatory has diagnosed in me as if in reproach but in fact just in the form of a joke. The notion that music could be 'about something' is a little bit faulty or uncongenial, at least to me. A piece of music is a certain organism, mechanism or, even more precisely, a phenomenon with an inner structure which can act like a dawn, breathing, growing, echoing, falling, drowning, ramification of roads, or formation of waves as wind gains force. However, it will never become a pastoral scenery, as it was common during the past epochs. I am trying to explain what was well-said by John Cage: 'The function of art is not to communicate one's personal ideas or feelings but rather to imitate nature in her manner of operation.'

Breathing Music for string quartet, live electronics and kinetic sculptures; Eclipses for violin, viola, cello, double bass, live electronics and soundproof glass installation; and the new piece, Sandglasses, for four cellos, live electronics and installation of video and lights - they reveal your attraction to interdisciplinary projects. In what aspects are they interesting to you?

I am interested in the visual aspect of musical ideas, the visualisation of sound producing and in the musical composition as a certain mechanism or phenomenon possessing a visual charge. This is what my musical ideas are like: throwing a little stone into water with ripples spreading around it, the pass by of two trains, the approaching

and receding siren with change of its sound frequency, etc. Sometimes the ideas of this kind can be brought to life not only using the inner structures of music but can also be relocated to surface, to the level of sound producing and presenting, a certain situation of performance by creating an installation, positioning sources of sound (i.e. performers) in space and so on.

In my first experiment of this kind, *Breathing Music*, the musicians perform inside kinetic sculptures (air bubbles) made of transparent materials. Through the use of the air compression they gradually shrink and get filled with air again, thus constantly changing their form. Each of them slowly 'inhales' and 'exhales' in its own tempo, this way governing the dynamics of the quartet's (musical) gestures. The breathing sculptures serve not only as a visualisation and materialisation of pulsating music, but also as giant mutes (as one of live-electronic tools) that inhibit the sound of the strings and transform their timbres.

Eclipses was conceived as a slow harmonic, textural and timbral metamorphosis of one single chord. Here musicians perform in a plexiglass installation - a sort of a magic 'soundproof music box' which is illuminated by changing light from its inside that creates the effect of a shadow theater of the musicians' motion. Audible sound (which is picked to be amplified by the computer) does not necessarily correspond to the bow gestures that are being followed by the audience and vice versa. Speaking metaphorically, these silent, barely audible pulsations can remind white dwarfs - the stars in the last phase of their existence, which are the object of study of my father, astronomer Rimas Janulis.

And finally, the inspiration of my new piece is a simultaneous launch of several sandglasses of different capacity and duration. The metaphoric sand which comes out from the sandglasses as sediment of passing time, accumulates and submerges the individuals imprisoned, the currently produced sounds are drowned out by their own resonance, the bow movements get slower and completely immobilize, until the relentless running of the chronometers stops, everything freezes and the reverse process of purification starts.

Apart from being a composer, you're also a musicologist. You received your Bachelor degree in the music theory in 2004 and have been teaching the language of contemporary music at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre since 2006. You are also active as a music critic. Does a musicological point of view to music make any impact on your creative work?

Theoretically, composition and the science of music should not contradict each other because both areas, in the broader view, are the same as long as they deal with contemplation over music or exploration of its phenomena. However, one normally employs different attitudes when analysing the musical language of other composers

and writing his or her own music. If you are seriously analysing the musical language of a certain composition, you try to explain and rationalise every single sound, you try to identify the common system and you get irritable if one or other note does not fit into it. Writing myself, I can't avoid starting with certain systems of musical parameters but I get rid of them at a certain stage of creative process and ascend over schemes, orderly drafts and all kinds of Fibonacci proportions. I start interpreting them freely and intuitively as if improvising with the material I have just created. The match of systematism and intuitivism, I believe, is just what creates the so called 'musicality' which is a certain taboo for a serious analyst of music who can not allow herself search for it and to name it because it is barely perceivable and hardly explicable.

You have studied at the Verdi Conservatory, you have admired Puccini's music and now you live in Milan. It may seem that all of your ways lead to opera. Where are they actually leading you to now?

The things that I am nourishing in my music hardly lead to opera because that genre requires, apart from other things, verbal articulation of text and more or less narrative illustration of content while I am more fond of vocal which produces mormorando or vowels. However, opera or the synthetic aspect of stage genres as a whole, including stage setting, lights and other visual elements, attracts me and could inspire innovative visions of musical theatre some day.