

Let it happen

by Juliana Hodkinson

Why sing? Children, birds. Why sing? At home, coming home. The bath, the garden, the garden path. The garage. Under the car or at the sink. Leaving home. “One ventures from home on the thread of a tune”, they say. Or at work. In the field. In the open-plan office. In the rehearsal, the performance. The work. In nature, naturally. In the field or the forest, on a hill-top. Hoch auf dem Berg, tief im Thal. Inside a cave. Down the river. Across the sea. Passing through the city, in my car, on my bike, as I walk, in a moment when I forget that I have earphones on. In the shopping mall, the coffee shop. In the fitness studio, so many earphones and loudspeakers, so many musics going on I don't need to sing. But then later, it's on my mind. At home. At work. As I ride or walk. The taxi-driver has chosen Mireille Mathieu to begin the day.

What song? My song, one I learned, one I made up. Our song, the one we heard, the one we shared. The song of our country, their country, all the different countries, everyone singing for their own national team. The players singing. Flags can do nothing without trumpets, they say. The song itself. From the radio, on the radio. From my mother. From a music-box. From a press-and-play toy. Off a CD. One I downloaded. One I learned from a score. A small score, a large score, an opera score. A part. The vocal part. A part with no score, medieval. Mensurally or metrically notated, perhaps, or graphic. Which range? The vocal range. The range of this voice or that. Bass baritone. Mezzo. Coloratura. Spanning a small range, a large range, or exceeding the range, maybe avoiding the range entirely. Or for any vocal range. Or no range at all, because it is whispered, or shouted. Or merely sung inwardly, while thinking of other skies, other places,

another music, another place. Sung silently. (We will come to instruments shortly.) The depths or the heights of expression, where words fail but music succeeds? Where was that ever supposed to be? The depths where music stops but sound goes on? Then what kind of sound? Sound that has lost its sonority? Gasp. Sigh. Moan. Groan. Breathing of one kind or another. Amplified, perhaps. Stopped, or flowing. Marking the duration of the body. Inhale audibly, inaudibly. Exhale. Slowly, regularly, irregularly, suddenly, over 30 seconds, all in one breath, a stopping breath.

We seem to be far from Bounce, Save As, (wait), Choose file, Send.

And we haven't even looked at the bathroom, with its particular acoustic that is so well suited to singing, the spider in the bath. The garden shed, now there's a dramatic setting for a love scene if ever there was one. The attic, if you have one. The cellar. The house next door, if they're up for it. Let's ask them. We're having an opera tomorrow night, and it might be noisy (or quiet), could we have the fifth act at your place?

Jump cut. I dive under the surface of the bathwater to escape the ringtone of first my mobile phone then the landline. I imagine that this plunge is the start of an Olympic effort to work through the rest of today and tonight, complete my work, what better place for it than at home?

Sung inwardly,
while thinking of other skies, other places,
another music, another place.
Sung silently.

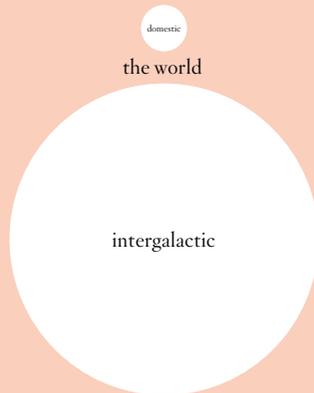
Ok, so we have stopped the breath, but can we go deeper still, or higher, or further beyond? Beyond the words, just the music. Beyond the music, just sound. But the thing about the body is always: the less (or the more) singing there is, the more expression there is. Expression (like narrative): the airport literature of contemporary aesthetics. The airport, where are we going? Are we still trying to get deeper, higher, further beyond? Hands up, who wants to go further beyond? And how many want to stay. At home. In the kitchen, the garden, the living room, the bedroom, that's four acts already. Four acts, that's more than Wozzeck.

I am in Berlin and it is drizzling outside. Vibrating time. Weather like this is the three-dimensional real-time reminder of my encounter with David Claerbout's silent video installation Ruurlo. Bocurloscheweg, 1910 (1997). In Ruurlo, the landscape, the people, the sky are all still, a black and white photograph; only the leaves on the giant tree move, a silent visual rustle, a kind of arboreal frullato, leaf by leaf, an orchestral frullato. Here, through my window, the building opposite, the trees just turning green, the parked cars, the pavement, and the graffiti are all still, dry, dusty, waiting for rain, and just the air vibrates with a silent

drizzle. A soft, detailed visual rhythm is the only sign that temporality has crashed my daydream as I gaze through the window that is still beautifully framed, before it becomes modernized with a plastic window-case.

The domestic, the main place – here, ideas have all the space and time to unfold. After all the work is done, the guests have left, we will still be here. Here we are not there for anyone else except for those who have seen the manifestations of all our emotions. Where were we? Ah yes, let's go from who wants to go further beyond, and how many want to stay at home.

Well, I see we have a present majority for manifesting something in the world. The world – a tight place sandwiched between the domestic and the intergalactic. The world – a limited country where there are people and ideas. And organisations, institutions. Opera-houses. Looking at what gets built today in the way of opera-houses, it'd be fair to say that they do want to go higher and further beyond. But being so heavy, so huge, what is the probability they will take us there, these boxes, domes, spheres, flying elephants, giant toasters that hover above the city, the harbour, the car park, the man-made lake? For added effect. You can use the roof of the Copenhagen Opera House for diving into the harbour. A guy in a Red Bull t-shirt did it, you can see it on YouTube. It is one of the cleanest harbours in Europe. You could ski down the roof of the Oslo Opera House and straight into the water.



Another great harbour. Yes, it is important to consider how to place a new opera-house in the world. The setting. Going inside, we find all kinds of organic forms and gigantic chambers. The Guangzhou Opera House is a river valley. Long panning shot. Organism and machinery. For added effect. The machinery has to produce the magic to get us there. Beyond. Or at least, to the effect, at least that far. The setting. So much machinery in this organic form. Will the Wizard of Oz come out from behind the curtain? Take the guided tour. "One opens the circle a crack, opens it all the way, lets someone in, calls someone, or else goes out oneself, launches forth", they write. "One launches forth, hazards an improvisation. But to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it." I do not associate these buildings with improvisation. Not even their foyer concerts, meet the composer, explore the world of, preview, open to the public, visit a rehearsal, do a workshop, see the workshop performance, meet the sponsor, thank you thank you thank you.

Maybe we can get there with instruments. Instrumental theatre, the Plan B of contemporary opera, where for a few decades we were not bothered by singing. There were speeds and rhythms. Long pauses. And objects. Objects and instruments. Definitely beyond something. Beyond the audience. On the other hand, a theatre of objects is extremely well suited to kitchen performance. Except for the lighting, perhaps.

But we could use matches. Strike a match, illuminate the score, the music, the musician reading the music and playing an instrument. For as long as the match burns. Or, dip it quickly in your glass first. Water on the match makes it fizz. Flicker, fade. Darkness and silence. In the kitchen or the black box. Anyway, with a theatre of instruments we are safely in the realm of externalized relations and incorporeal events. Relatively incorporeal. What a relief. They write that refrains mark territories. But rhythms reinforce the markings, speeds and rhythms. "It is well known that rhythm is not meter or cadence, even irregular meter or cadence: there is nothing less rhythmic than a military march. The tom-tom is not 1-2, the waltz is not 1, 2, 3, music is not binary or ternary, but

refrain, hunting refrain, child's refrain are so many admirable assemblages swept up by the powerful earth machine and its cutting edges: Wozzeck's voice, by which the earth becomes sonorous, Marie's death cry moving over the pond, the repeated B note, when the earth howled ... It is owing to this disjunction, this decoding, that the romantic artist experienced the territory."

When I made the decision to compose the opera Wozzeck, music was in a unique situation. This is Berg talking now, not Deleuze and Guattari. In the Vienna School, we had just moved beyond the beginnings of the musical movement which falsely became known as atonal music. Composing in this style had until then been limited to the creation of small forms – songs, piano and

Water on the match makes it fizz.
Flicker, fade.
Darkness and silence.

rather forty-seven basic meters, as in Turkish music." Forty-seven. "Meter is dogmatic, but rhythm is critical; it ties together critical moments, or ties itself together in passing from one milieu to another." So, rhythm is on the way, it moves, unlike periodic repetition. "It is the difference that is rhythmic, not the repetition." Changing planes between different metres or pulses. And therefore, expressive.

There we have it again, the expressive. This time, the expressive instrumental. I mention Wozzeck because it is in the big music chapter, and also because Berg knew how to transform instrumental structures into dramatic forms. But it took him many years. They say there that "by the end of Wozzeck, the lullaby refrain, military refrain, drinking

orchestral works, or, in the case of extended works (as in Schoenberg's 31 Pierrot-melodramas or his first two one-act stage works – Die glückliche Hand and Erwartung), forms which were derived from textual or dramatic-narrative pretexts. The reason: this style was exempt from tonality and therefore also from one of the strongest and most reliable means of creating large- and small-scale form. So once I had decided to write a full-length opera, I faced a new task, at least regarding harmony: how could I achieve the same compelling musical unity without the support of this trusty tool, tonality, and its formal possibilities? By unity I mean not only within the small forms of scenes, but also the difficult task of unity at the level of the larger form – the individual acts, and the

Inhale audibly,
inaudibly.

Exhale.

general architectonics of the whole work. Text and plot alone would not suffice as guarantors of this unity. And certainly not in the case of Büchner's *Wozzeck* which consisted of 23 loose fragmentary scenes. (Actually, 27.) Even after I managed to find a three-act disposition of the text material - which contrived through 3 acts of 5 scenes each to keep the exposition, peripeteia (turning-point) and catastrophe of the dramas clearly separated, thereby producing a unity of action - the issue of musical unity was still wide open. [I decided that] the end of each act - the place where in tonal artworks a clearly recognizable return and reinforcement of the main key occurs - would have to be the place where the harmonic circle of a large act could close in on itself in an atonal work. I managed this reinforcement by making each act in this opera progress towards the very same chord, almost forming a cadence, and - just as with a tonic key - letting the harmony pause there.

But a century later we are still circling around the theatre of small forms, music for small spaces, musical scenes for instruments and objects, chamber concerts come alive as living tableaux. Lo-fi 4D chamber concerts. Let's go outside again.

Landscape, the sheep are in a physical landscape. We should say, they write, that territorial motifs form rhythmic faces or characters, and that territorial counterpoints form melodic landscapes. I have left out the italics. Mahler says that the singing of the birds, the colour of the flowers, and the fragrance of the forest are not enough to make Nature, that the god Dionysus and the great Pan are needed. The Ur-refrain of the earth harnesses all refrains whether territorial or not, and all milieu refrains. They also write that the lied is the musical art of the landscape. The lied with its cycles, its wandering, its epic chains of short forms. Is cycle the right word, Liedzyklus? Do the songs wander in circles, or do they pursue lines of flight? The wanderer on his winter journey, his life, his beating heart, the hot tears running down his cheeks, his pain, his limbs, his eyes, his lungs, his organs, his path, his footsteps, his trusty walking-staff. His piano. The sheep are filmed in a fog on the plains above Sarajevo. This comes directly after the sequence with the bass drum and flexatone accompanying the male singer speaking (amplified and slightly distorted) in a florid rhetorical style full of glissandi, accompanied by the cello on slightly detuned G- and C-strings, left-hand fingers placed loose and

flat on the strings, following the singer's contours of enunciation. (Optional contrabass clarinet, violin, other instruments.) The footage is of buildings in Sarajevo after the war, and the text is by Donald Rumsfeld from before another war. There are known knowns. There are things we know we know. And there are known unknowns. That is to say (mm-hmm) there are things we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we do not know.

Why sing? Why the instruments? Who's listening? Do we need a special space for it? Birds sing in the forest, a very favourable architectural acoustic. There, they can also eat and drink, socialize. The garden party. I am not convinced we will locate the emotional content of music as it pertains to collective experience in the garden. But, on the other hand, why not? Yes, let's try the garden.

The birds and the sheep are in a physical landscape; many of the other actors in the video are surrounded by a landscape of information. How can we sustain ourselves and reflect, or perceptually maybe even thrive within this landscape of fragmented information? A scattering, Versprengung. Let's not even try to bundle it, or bring it together. Let it go. Let it disperse. You can't stop radiation. It's out of control. Let it happen. Yes. No. Let it go. Or take it with you. Take us with you as you go. Leaving Oz, download an opera onto your smartphone, your pod, your pad. If you cannot get a ticket for the operacast at your local cinema, enjoy the bathroom opera streaming direct to your palm from It looks like opera doesn't have to be able to do a crowd any more, at least not every time. This is the time, the moment to link up to the body without organs. Escape the repertoire, hear the disembodied voice vary itself, unlimit itself, assemble itself, sex and de-sex and re-sex itself, yes, a thousand tiny sexes.

Let's hear that song, the song we don't know yet. Let's go beyond the world, to the home, to the net, to write and sing and hear the songs we don't yet know. Yes. Let it happen.