

Natascha Nikeprelevic

A Universtandable Song

So I choose singing as a way of life; singing because the voice can do more than only speak; singing in order to transcend language into the vast field of music; singing, because music as a medium is, from the start, universal, abstract, nonsemantic and therefore allows everything and narration becomes possible at many different levels; singing as mediation between speaking and keeping silent.

The body is the home of the voice.
It springs from the body physically
to enthuse it
to move it
in respect to its origin:
to be music.

(Michael Vetter, allOne programme, 2001)

SINGING AND SPEAKING

Until the age of twenty I wished for a professional vocation which encompassed everything. I wanted to become an actress in order to express, through the spoken word, all I am, will be, all that every one of us is. The first time I had an impulse to abandon a world of semantics, to communicate with just pure structure, happened while rehearsing Hölderlin's Empedokles. The director cut a whole monologue from my role and asked me to express it in an abstract vocal way, while remembering the text inside my head. I solved this task by placing tones in space, screaming, lamenting, shouting and pleading. Was this singing? Or even music? It wasn't a song, as there were no words. The sounds were freely improvised. In the beginning they moved between "a" and "o", and then slowly involved other vowels while articulating with the consonants. Was it a text? It was more like a texture. What I was saying was not comprehensible in a strictly semantic way, but nevertheless it was born of spoken language and followed its laws. Today I would say that, for me, it was a language which was characterised by the fact that nobody could understand it and yet, finally, could be understood by everyone because the theme arose from vibrations. At the beginning of my first workshop with the artist and musician Michael Vetter an improvised choir was scheduled: the members of the chorus did not know in advance what they had to sing: no notes, text or melody; nothing the

participants could stick to. Michael, as choir leader, started to draw tones and sounds in space with his hands and voice, encouraging the members of the choir to do the same. A very dense communication occurred, distinguished by careful listening, intense observation and exact adaptation of the events. Each singer in the choir reacted individually and differently to the various tones. An apparently chaotic sound pattern came forth which nevertheless was turned into a valid whole shaped by the choir leader. At first I was extremely annoyed by all of this. Only much later did I understand the principle behind his method: to harness imitation as the archetype of learning in front of the wagon of artistic expression. Until then improvisation had been for me the embodiment of torture. I spent 80% of my acting lessons sitting way back in the darkest corner of the room, trapped by my fear of being asked to do an improvisation. Michael's concept rescued me. I was so thankful for the opening of this valve: I felt that finally I could allow my being to unfold itself. I began to entrust myself to intuition, to cast myself into the moment, throwing away concepts and ideas in order to get involved with the matter which seemed to be made only of question-marks that I imagined to be behind a doorway. I discovered that singing is to use speaking as a musical instrument. Now the interrelation of speech and music, their kinship, their qualities, their convergence, form the background from which I see my existential and professional task as a singer: so singing is spoken music and speech is a sung song.

LANDSCAPES OF THE SOUL

For me, singing means an expression of what sways within my soul beyond the semantic aspect of speaking. I like to call my way of singing universal because it doesn't use a special verbal language, but it creates its own structural texture which makes use of the phonetic materials of all the languages of the world: a "universtandable" (universal/understandable) song. Nevertheless I do understand the textual form that takes shape outside of me. I began to discover vowels and consonants. An "a" is perhaps the first sound a human being can produce, because you only have to open your mouth in order to make it. An "a" can be the expression of astonishment, fear and pain, but also of understanding, relief, happiness and lust. I discovered I could communicate both positive and negative states of the soul with the sound "a" - as with all other vowels - and that there were a lot more exciting transitions to be investigated. A great project might be only to use the sound "a" and, with it, to tell a complete and complex drama. Given the fact that all consonants and vowels presuppose different facial expressions, I could also imagine letting them be represented by different facial masks which talk to each other - sound by sound - like alien races in a theatre piece. Different from vowels, consonants give me a much more sensual physical experience, because many of them come out with the help of the tongue, throat and lips rubbing against each other. I get such an erotic feeling from "l"! The tip of the tongue is placed on the upper palate just behind the teeth to conduct vibrations...On the other hand I feel "rrr" to be almost like an animal: articulated by the tip of the tongue, it lets the front palate flutter like a bird; while articulated by the back of the tongue and the rear palate, it gives me an almost warming, purring physical sensation. How about making a Kama Sutra of the different positions of the consonants interacting with lips, tongue, teeth, palate and throat?! I have experienced a Japanese equivalent of this with Michael's composition Okyo, which uses the immediate devotion to the sounds themselves, and to their specific qualities, instead of semantic texts. My favourite and closest consonant is "m": it lies on my lips so

intimately and tenderly. It is also discreet: nobody can see if I use it for a prayer. But, basically, I love all consonants, in fact each single letter of the alphabet, and if I could I would like to explore all the sounds of all the other language systems as well. From all of this emerges a 'song of landscapes', which I don't let myself be pinned down by. Everything has already been said and sung of the richness and complexity of the soul: what essential elements can I still add? I can only create a 'song-language' that exists now, through me. So I choose singing as a way of life; singing because the voice can do more than only speak; singing in order to transcend language into the vast field of music; singing, because music as a medium is, from the start, universal, abstract, non-semantic and therefore allows everything and narration becomes possible at many different levels; singing as mediation between speaking and keeping silent. Silence is always my starting point for concentration. The relationship of sound and silence relates to the biggest and most difficult lessons that I have had to learn. Again and again I catch myself doing too much. I still feel that it is a big challenge to put these two forces in proportion.



Natascha Nikeprelevic (2003)
Photo: Achim Weber

MANY STYLES

The material of my singing is freely composed from all possible vocal ways of creating sound, but at the same time it can be employed consciously and be clearly and stylistically organised in different registers. To develop this field that lies between language and music, the best prerequisites were offered to me by Michael Vetter at his Institut for Intermedial Improvisation - Music, Painting, Photography, Dance and Theatre. Michael's study of the domain of music and especially that of song is based upon three

pillars: atonal-melody characterised by speech, diatonic-melody characterised by sung songs, and the archaic-harmonies characterised by overtones. Within these areas, different styles are recognised: atonal-melody corresponds to the style of composers like Schönberg, Berg and Webern, but also to that of the speech in Japanese theatre traditions like Noh, Kyogen and Kabuki. Speech generally uses atonal-melodies: while speaking, the pitch moves freely in relation to rhythm and intonation and therefore can be used for such an exploration. Our emotional structural intuition decides the pitch and duration of the sound. Once aware of how my intuition works, I follow it attentively with my senses in order to study it and give it form. Diatonic melodies include, for example, the raga-style, the occidental singing style of pop-songs, folk-music, etc. During diatonic-melody singing I 'dream on' a melody from the great store of the world's melodies. And while I listen to myself dreaming in that way, I become aware of my dreams and thus give them form. The archaic-harmonies style of singing is employed by all ritual songs which recite on a continuous pitch. That means that they are entering the field of overtones and are thus harmonically structured by nature. I learn how to sing overtones by listening to myself. I let myself be led by the reality of phonemes, I get to know them better and better, and I learn to communicate with their laws. The world of sounds and noises takes up the biggest space in the possibilities of what is musically audible. This world too has its home in the most different styles of singing, as for example in the atonal music of Stockhausen, Nono and Berio, but also in some examples of free jazz. The most important inspiration beyond all these styles, for me, is nature: in the sounds of the environment and in my daily phonetics.

INTUITION AND INTENTION

For a concert, I sometimes enter the space from behind, mixing with the audience. I sit amongst people and at a certain point I move on my chair, so no-one really knows if I am 'one of them', and I utter low sounds. Very slowly my movements and sounds become more artificial and I begin to distinguish myself from the spectators. At other times, I enter the stage directly, breathing. I stand there, move my hands quietly and I let my breath expand into the space, going from being almost inaudible to wind-like and stormy sounds. I also burst surprisingly onto the podium uttering loud, highpitched, soprano tones and even commenting on all of this with bizarre big movements. Or I can step whispering from behind the curtain, if there is one. Or I sing a lyric aria from a gallery above the heads of the spectators. I love variety and I like to perform in different spaces like cellar bars, churches, open air theatres, swimming pools, sound-proof concrete rooms, furniture shops, gyms, living-rooms. Sometimes I react to a spectator coughing or throat clearing. I take this as an upbeat for my first sound, which can start by coughing as well in order to integrate the 'first' coughing into the piece of music or with a big silence which continues until the public has become very, very quiet. I like to take any noise coming from outside, be it from the audience or from the street - a siren, barking, a car - as an occasion for musical motives, processing them so as to transform them further until they become unrecognisable. Sometimes I try to integrate new sounds spontaneously, leading them into a clash with the sounds already present. At other times I let the foreign sounds remain foreign to set them sharply against the sounds I have already established as known. Ideally I am improvising 100%, and, in the best case scenario "dealing with the unpredictable" brings forth permanently new

sounds. Naturally, here and there, acquaintances sneak in and try to turn me away from my rigid concept of improvisation. This tension is very interesting and a permanent challenge! Follow whatever comes. Trust in it as in something that knows more than I do. Sing thinking; think singing. Learn from language insight and apply its laws while singing. Never know what it is that is speaking and who and what about; only react as in a dialogue between me and you. Perceive yourself as someone else; listen to this person and answer. Allow a line that makes all kinds of detours come into being. I could call all of this "the inner attitude" of my work, the fertile soil that nourishes my singing. Intuition, improvisation and intention merge all through my 'song', provoking and challenging each other, and allowing me sometimes to rediscover "the song of all things". While I improvise, my hands are what feet are for a dancer. I let them speak; they are my secret main actor. My voice almost seems to be conducted by them. I let my hands lead each other, in order to watch them as a third person in the bond. Basically I am trying to split myself up into different parts: hands, voice, feet, head, arms, mind. They should all have the right to speak and create. None of them knows which is the best way, they all function in dialogue with each other and 'it' moves on... somewhere towards the moment. When I recorded my first experimental radio play for Deutschland Radio Berlin with Michael Vetter, I was terribly excited and totally insecure about being able to manage 70 minutes a cappella without interruption. In this piece there is a scene where laughing is used as material for music. Through rhythmical and tune changes all possible ways of laughing are made into structural laughter, in other words, into laughing music which is executed absolutely seriously and technically. As I was overexcited, I passed over the border into the so-called concrete world of representation; I burst out of my 'concentration corset' and started snorting and really laughing. Nobody noticed except Michael, who perceived my false step and tried to integrate my true laughter with the help of elaborated laughter ornaments. This reaction increased my own laughter even more and, again, Michael reacted by putting it into music. Each time I listen to the recording, I am fascinated by the dialogue between natural laughter and its musical transformation.

Painting is a dance of the hands. The hand moves on paper like feet on the floor. It is wonderful that with the help of a pencil this dance leaves visible traces so that I can then comprehend what happened in detail. Reading the traces of the hand movement teaches me a lot. When later I sing again and I follow the movements of my hands with my eyes, the difference, whether it is a line on paper or a line in the air, whether it is visible or audible, becomes smaller and smaller. I also try to draw lines in space and then remember on paper how the hand moved. As somebody who improvises, contact with the spectators is decisive; the audience are an enormous motor for my concentration and inspire me a lot; nevertheless their presence can also irritate me. I feel fragile and at the mercy of the moods in the room. But this also seems to make me vigilant and nimble. I miss the freshness of reactions in my rehearsals, even though I am happy to give myself a lot of time to rehearse, so I can try out things and afford to take detours. Rehearsals are essential; being without spectators is efficient for my working process; the public performance is the essence of my working process.

THE BECOMING OF THE VOICE

I passed the final examination at Accademia Capraia with the piece allEin (allOne) which Michael Vetter composed for me. It bears the subtitle "for a singing actress". allEin

demonstrates during sixty minutes the process of voice coming into being. In the beginning there is breath, from which sounding tones develop. Deep overtone sounds, which remind one of ritual songs, arise. From here, my voice becomes very slowly aware of itself as a melodic instrument and confronts its own vocal possibilities. On this path the recitative momentum of the voice steps forward and reminds me of the world of language. Towards the end it merges somehow into the tone of all tones. What remains at the end is the overtone melody of a tone held for a long time which, for me, seems to transcend the human voice into what characterises angels. I present this piece with my non-amplified natural human voice. I don't use sets or props. For me this is still the biggest challenge, but also the most important statement for my work. A circle closes personally with the piece allEin, from my initial definition as an actress at home with semantic language and my present definition, as a structurally orientated vocalist. In this piece I have the wonderful opportunity to reinvent again and again the secret of what language and music is. Luckily there are still enough question marks left for me and they are even increasing. I have given up searching for what is behind the doors: asking has become more important to me than all the possible answers.

Translated from German by Christoph Falke

NATASCHA NIKEPRELEVIC is a performer, improviser and interpreter of contemporary vocal music.

From 1993 to 1995 she worked at the Wuppertaler Bühnen as a dancer in several operettas and other productions taking the chance to study the work of Tanztheater Pina Bausch. In 1996 she went to Michael Vetter's Accademia Capraia in Italy in order to study "Intermedial Improvisation" including experimental vocal music, painting, photography, dancing and poetry for the following six years. Since she collaborates with him for many broadcasting-productions, concerts and performances all over Europe and the Far East. Besides her performing partnership with Vetter, Natascha developed a new theatre form called "structural music theatre" and has taken up the task of bringing her music-theatre work to the stage, as soloist and as director of various ensembles. In addition she will present with Vetter in 2008 at Tonhalle Zürich the worldpremiere of the complete version of "POLES for 2" for two soloists and shortwave-receivers (1970) of the late composer Karlheinz Stockhausen.