

Albertine. Dramaturgy for solo female voice and whispering audience

Involuntary memories: which of us knows them not? Hermann Ebbinghaus was the first to describe them, in the context of his memory research. They are brought to the surface by chance impressions. Marcel Proust, in an interview, coined for them the now well-known expression *mémoires involontaires*, which was to become the epitome of his comprehensive work *In Search of Lost Time*, in the sixth volume of which, images of Albertine in flight from the goad of jealousy turn into a recurring torment for the narrator. Not even the news of Albertine's accidental death has the power to alter it. The novel's fragmented-fleeting interlacing of past and present, typical of the *mémoire involontaire*, is also a principal characteristic of the stage composition *Albertine* by Lucia Ronchetti, based on a collage of textual passages. The plot is, on the whole, left aside, but then, even in Proust, it serves essentially as an occasion for the process of recollection that drifts into stream of consciousness. In Ronchetti, a

deconstructive treatment succeeds in uncovering underlying layers of the model.

The epic narrative form is, meanwhile, dramatized in music, with three contrasting stages of affect: bereavement, eroticism and death. The casting is extraordinarily original: a female singer, to whom excerpts of the text in the original French are assigned, accompanied, in the background, by male speaking voices offering commentary together with passages from a translation of the novel into the language of the country where the performance is taking place. The speaking voices thus provide the audience with reference points about the plot. With very few exceptions, they express themselves by whispering, as if it were their job to keep the action going by 'prompting' the protagonist's involuntary memories with whispered narration.

Albertine is and remains fictitious. The singer does not represent her. Albertine 'appears' in the first section as the phantasy of a male ego. Ingenious dramaturgical refractions of this sort are typical of Ronchetti's work. The second section, "*Au bord de la mer*", is devoted to

the remembered episode, involving Albertine's fondness for early morning sea bathing, in the course of which caresses are exchanged with a laundress and her companions. Ronchetti was inspired here by the frequently reappearing Proustian metaphor of the sea as an iridescent, endlessly creative, protean element. For now Albertine, after frequent repetition of her name, almost achieves a physical presence. But the use of the past tense in the text gives one the impression of still watching the scene through a telescope. The third section depicts a reflection of the male ego upon death, connected with affective outbursts.

The three sections are in musical contrast to one another. With its array of tone production methods (melancholy belcanto tones, repetitions characterized by breath, delicate inner voices, tremolo with the mouth covered) the first part plumbs the aching loss by means of the varied vocal techniques the piece specifies. The second and longest section seems most distinctly separate. Just at the beginning the belcanto tones provide a transition. But Albertine, who is no longer a purely

phantasmal figure, is presented as resoundingly joyful, with archaic sounds, including gentle laughter and delicate whistling, to the fore. The whole arsenal of voice techniques that have been developed in new music is displayed and enlarged. Enormous demands are made upon the singer. The partly reflective third section of *Albertine* returns to the lovely sorrowful tone, even blending into *Sprechgesang*, but there are also wild, fast, rebellious leaps into the tonal realm; entangled in repeated, violent, confused, quickly fading outbursts is an uprising against death, which consigns everything to the past. Death – no end? Just senseless?

The dramatic tension between the three stages of affect reaches a symbolic final shape in the evocative utterance of Albertine's name. With microtones now and then flattening, sometimes tremolo, produced with a half-closed mouth, the affliction of the first part is in contrast to the second, with its ascending cries and giant interval leaps. In the third section, a meditation on death, there are no cries at all.

For Lucia Ronchetti's compositional imagination, the stimulus can proceed from early music, philosophical texts, or paintings, to name but a few. In each case a specific and interpretative appropriation takes place. In the case in hand, a novel, this acquisition appears in dramatization through word repetitions. Thus the "*absence*" of Albertine is emphasized seven times for the audience and, after a brief interruption, another four times. Language can also – when deprived of its characteristic division into units – turn into music as a continuous intoning, for example when a word is used not just as a representative symbol of crying ("*pleurer*"), but also actually cries: "*Ah je Ah je je me re met t a i s à → p l e u r e r → à → pleu[U→A→U]rer→à→pleurer→[U→A→U] pleurer→[U→A→A] à→pleurer Ah*". Meanings are properly squeezed out of even the sound of language: "*l→à là ah là aus----si aus-si aus-si aus-si aus-----si il ya a la mort qui à passé il y a la mort qui à passé il y a la mort qui a passé la mort qui à passé, a a a a a a...*". The repeated "mistaken" stress accent on *à*, used to refer back to *l→à*, makes this intention perfectly clear.

Albertine is a *Hörtheater*, which is reminiscent of the *madrigale rappresentativo*. Rhetorical figures from early music turn up, such as baroque trills for the singing voice. The above-mentioned *pleurer* is, as a chromatically descending line, an allusion to the centuries-old *lamento* figure. And night falls as the singer exhales into the darkness. In such 'painterly music' the commentating male voices can take part as well, causing flickering aquatic effects, or, in a spoken counterpoint, symbolizing aching loss as 'cutting as steel'. On both the macro- and the micro-levels, Lucia Ronchetti's music-dramatic talent is plain to see.