

## **Interview with Jens Cording**

in <http://www.i-n-t-o.de/en/komp-lucia-ronchetti-interview.html>

on *Rumori da Monumenti*

EN

### **I Assembled a Colourful Musical 'Compilation'«**

*Is this your first visit to Johannesburg or have you already been here?*

**LR:** This is my first time here and my first stay in Africa. When the warm rain pattered on the wooden roof of my room I knew that I was in a different part of the world.

*What expectations have you brought with you?*

**LR:** I want to begin composing as soon as possible and draft a first version, a sketch, an *esquisse*. I will try to explore the complex »Machina mundi« of Johannesburg with its labyrinths and its contradictions and investigate all its unexplored sound mines.

*What is your first impression of Johannesburg?*

**LR:** I know Johannesburg from the novels of Ivan Vladislavic, an author who I met a few years ago at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart. His books »The Exploded View« and »Portrait With Keys« imparted a wonderful, mythological notion of the complexity and peculiarities of the city. My first impression was a confirmation of what I had read, a positive response by reality to the fictional landscape. When Vladislavic wrote: »For hills, we have mine dumps covered with grass. We do not wait for time and the elements to weather us, we change the scenery ourselves, to suit our moods. Nature is for other people, in other places«, I read therein the play between utopia and dystopia which feeds his texts, as it does the work of many artists living here. Johannesburg is a city in which everyone may feel to be an explorer.

*What is the magnetism, peculiar to this city?*

**LR:** I envisage Johannesburg as a polluted, parasitical, overpopulated, multi-ethnic and dangerous city in which there exist a number of sensitive people, who in accompanied solitude create structures for a future happiness and reflect on the ideal of brotherhood. I have the feeling, that people here believe in a better future and are prepared to do something toward it.

*Did you prepare yourself in some special way for this journey?*

**LR:** I read books about Johannesburg especially by authors who live here, for instance the novels by Vladislavic, but also by other very interesting writers like Terry Kurgan, Jo Racliffe, Antie Krog, Jonathan Manning and Bongani Madondo. Aside from that I researched places and streets that repeatedly cropped up in my readings and so gathered impressions from differing perspectives and times and hereby accumulated an almost crushing number of views and ideas. Now I hope to be able to replace this conglomeration of information with my own experiences. Thus, for instance the mention of Sophiatown by Mandela brought me to the wonderful song by Thandi Klaasen; and a few places which Vladislavic describes like the public library reminded me of that great apocalyptic book by Jonathan Manning where he writes about white architecture and racism in South Africa, but also of the work of the young South African artist Bronwyn Lace, who creates fictional art spaces in fictional locations of Johannesburg.

*What do you want to investigate in this city?*

**LR:** I want to explore Johannesburg together with other people and gather the memories on these wanderings. To this purpose I am looking for a sound

engineer to capture the sounds of the city and a sociologist who can elucidate to me the social problems that Johannesburg is wrestling with at the moment. Furthermore I will contact local artists like Ismail Farouk or the director Minky Schlesinger; people who possess an eye for the essence of things – an ability which in a city like this is of inestimable worth.

*Is that why you decided to participate in the »into...« project?*

**LR:** I find projects attractive that engross me totally, projects for which one requires a good deal of idealism whose realisation presents me with complex problems. It was a tempting idea to work with the Ensemble Modern and spend a month in a city which had long since fascinated me. It was as if the pieces of a dynamic positive puzzle connected to one another colliding into a meaningful future.

*Do you know the music of this country and are you interested in it?*

**LR:** I listened to a great deal of South African music before I came here, music of various styles and traditions. There appears to be a fruitful interchange between the most interesting musical communities that enrich my knowledge and will most certainly influence my compositional ideas. The fact that these communities exist in such diversity is fascinating.

*Do you intend to incorporate the country's traditional music into your work?*

**LR:** I'm working on that right now, analysing pieces of some extremely interesting musicians such as Busi Mhlongo (in particular their adaptation of the Zulu based music Mbaqanga) or the group Shiya (who make traditional A-cappella music), and I will definitely transpose something of their music in my compositions. Not in the form of samples or sound objects but rather as constituents of the harmonic development of my piece, possibly as a negative dramaturgic element, as »wounds« in the musical structure.

*Is there someone you would really like to meet here?*

**LR:** All those whom I already made contact with before my trip and who have the time and inclination to show me their city.

*What experiences are important to you?*

**LR:** I want to experience the everyday life of people in this city, get to know their daily rituals and work flow, and I hope in the course of my stay here to learn to decipher the superordinate rhythms of this meta city.

*What meaning does the historical, cultural, political, religious and social background of the city have for you?*

**LR:** When someone like me is born in Rome, a city with an inexhaustible supply of histories and history, the past becomes automatically relevant. The interest in Johannesburg is the concentration of events that have metamorphosed the city in an extremely short space of time. The present is so chock-full that that alone creates a historicity. A dynamic prevails here which is both dangerous and at the same time beautiful and to which reality can no longer keep apace.

*What is it here that gives you the feeling of being foreign?*

**LR:** That it is dangerous to move around in the city on my own.

*Do you intend to document your impressions of the city in some form?*

**LR:** Yes, I want to record the noises of the city, but also extracts from concerts, conversations and performances with the help of a sound engineer familiar with the locality. It should be a kind of auditory journal which will influence my composition without, however, being an explicit part of it.

*Have you ever been so inspired by a place to write a composition?*

**LR:** I recently wrote a piece for German radio (Deutschlandradio Kultur), »Il Castello di Atlante«. It is a portrait of Rome through the sound of its doors:

doors which vary according to age, size and material, each one of them unique with their own creaks and squeaks. The work was about memories of the past. The stay in Johannesburg, however, will have resonances on my future.

*Will you be seeking an exchange with the other project participants?*

**LR:** Yes. I think our group here is a successful combination of interesting artists, and I'm already looking forward to be acquainted with the other's projects and to listen to their works.

*Do you already have a concrete idea of what your composition should be like?*

**LR:** I would like to develop a fictional dialogue on the utopia and dystopia of Johannesburg. A reflection of the pessimistic, tragic vision of Marc Augé and Zygmunt Bauman, of cities, that emerge everywhere sometimes in the most inappropriate locations, on »non-lieux«, as Augé dubs them, non-places, shaped by loneliness and fear. Tommaso Campanella wrote his Utopia »La città del sole« (»The City of the Sun«) in 1602, while serving a jail sentence for his radical religious and political convictions. Like Mandela, a man who paid for his utopia with the loss of his freedom, Campanella spent 27 years in jail without giving up his ideals. He described the »City of the Sun« as a place in which life is determined by science and religion and all possessions would be shared. It is a place in which reason and friendship govern. His revolutionary book appeared for the first time in Germany in 1623. Fragments from this philosophical essay will be incorporated into my composition, even if they are just quotations read out by musicians of the Ensemble Modern; in this way it will influence my work with the orchestra as well as the performance. The texture of my piece will bear sound colours characteristic of Johannesburg life – it shall be a creature between two extremes: of a negative and positive reality.

*How do you find your notes?*

**LR:** I am searching for a utopian space in which already existing sounds release an order of sequences. A space, where personal sound memories and intellectual speculations are unified into a common linguistic goal.

## Interview 2

*How do you regard your stay in Johannesburg in retrospect? Do you have the feeling that you know this town now?*

**LR:** I had the good fortune of having many, quite different, people showing me the city through their eyes. What remained is a complex, dense and contradictory image of Johannesburg. In spite of all that the city lost nothing of its attraction, for me it is still mysterious and ungraspable. One just cannot take it in; it is as if people and things are in continual flux.

*What makes this city so fascinating?*

**LR:** The crossover of architectonic styles which reflect various cultures but also the social development as a consequence of the most recent history. On the one hand there is the inner city, which was built by the white population during apartheid and whose architecture recalls rich European cities. Today it is primarily lived in by black fringe groups, the city administration has long since left this area of the city. In this surreal, vertical township people often live in luxurious architectonic shells with neither water nor electricity. It is as if at the centre of a ring of ultramodern suburbia the middle ages have broken out again. I find it fascinating how extreme individual city areas can differ from one another. The most impressive contrast is to be found between the

Alexandra Township and Sandton, the hyper-futuristic suburb, neighbours topographically but in terms of the rights and lifestyles, potentials and perspectives of their inhabitants they are worlds apart. What I particularly like about Johannesburg is the virtual verticality of the city – the distance between the deepest mine and the highest buildings (which can amount to almost 5km) and their respective elevators carrying people above or below the ground. I had the sense that the level upon which I moved to be a fragile surface, a partition wall between two worlds – one underground and one over ground. To obtain a first impression of Johannesburg the writer Ivan Vladislavic took me to the Carlton Center on Commissioner Street. In the skyscraper you can take a lift to a viewing platform called »Top of Africa« on the top floor. From there you have a panoramic view of the city and its bewildering counterpoints of decadence and futurism.

*Try, using five adjectives, to describe the city.*

**LR:** Loud, virtualised, metamorphosed, multi-layered, ruptured.

*What did you investigate in the city and what themes did you discover for yourself?*

**LR:** In my search for the noises and sounds of the city I recorded conversations in the various languages of the country (there are 11 official languages!) and people carrying out their work. While out and about I was continually accompanied by Johannesburgers and I collected their impressions and acoustic perceptions of the city. The result is a polyphonic panopticon, a collection of people's acoustic memories, those I encountered during my stay. To give an example: the artist and curator who lives in Braamfontein, Marcus Neustetter took me onto the terrace of his apartment on the 17th floor where I could experience the noise of the air-conditioners, generators and cars all melting into a kind of sound of the sea; hist fictional ocean; the composer Philip Miller took me to the Melville Koppies, where groups of Zionist, Ethiopian, Pentecostal and Apostolical church singers celebrated their Sunday services under the open sky, generating a fantastic mix of gospel variations, the *mbube*; the sound artist James Webb gave me a recording taken from the deepest mine of the country – the sound of the cage-lift descending, the stamping of the machines and the noise of thousands of miners at work; Mpho Maponya, a black sound engineer from Soweto, accompanied me to the Mai Mai market, where the Inyanga, Zulu medicine men, pounded medicinal herbs in huge metal mortars producing polyphonic bell-like sounds which gave the ritual crushing quite its own distinct rhythm.

*Has the image you had, up to now, of Johannesburg changed since your stay here?*

**LR:** Before my trip I read a great deal of literature on Johannesburg and so I knew quite a lot about the social and political situation there. What has really surprised me is the attitude of the people who live here; they embody a quite special combination of dreamer, idealist, a positive and communicative people, who appear to be fully conscious that it is impossible to lead a normal life in such a dangerous and chaotic city. Yet they all yearn for positive contacts and true friendships and seek to be social and creative in their work. *Just how much have your impressions and experiences influenced your work?*

**LR:** I hope that the linguistic wealth of this land will enter my composition. The black population here speak the most varying melodic, rhythmic languages in which all information is clothed in a story. This traditional narrative art is both

mysterious and clear at the same time. In my time here I have been acquainted with the beauty of the Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho and San languages and made recordings with the speakers explaining the characteristics of each of their idioms.

Most of the time I have spent here has been with locals, I have accompanied them during their day, gone with them to rehearsals, studio sessions or to their work place. I was fascinated by the multifaceted concepts of life that are possible here and how people succeed, in spite of all the social and ethnic differences to get something off the ground together. Of course I realise that where these people are concerned we are talking of the creative "elite" and not the average person. But I really enjoyed spending a day at William Kentridge's Theatre Studio, watching a new production of »Woyzeck« of his featuring Adrian Kohler's puppets. In his extraordinary ensemble white and black dancers, actors and puppeteers live and work side by side. I was also at Philip Miller's studio while he was playing the music for a French film production on South Africa. When I saw the way the black musicians came to the studio and started their musical dialogue, free yet imprisoned in their tradition, how they were completely submerged in their landscapes of sound and in the process styles overlaid each other producing a kind of vertical compression (in particular the wonderful Zulu singer Zamo Mbuto), I got the idea of how many levels of experience and memories are overlaid upon one another in this city. Johannesburg is extremely old and simultaneously ultra modern, and perhaps music is a place in which these two apparently irreconcilable extremes can find positive expression.

*Have you become acquainted with the music of this country?*

**LR:** The landscape of contemporary South African music is far too complex and to a large extent far too »underground« for one to discover and understand in the course of a month. But I think that I have succeeded to assemble a colourful musical "compilation" with, amongst other things, unpublished recordings by musicians who I have got to know here. The collection makes no claims on objectivity, but exhibits a cross section of traditional South African music. It is a panorama of the musical fundamentals of the ordinary people here.

*Will you incorporate elements of South Africa's musical inheritance in your composition?*

**LR:** Yes. I will realize a composition for solo recorded voice and ensemble using fragments from Ivan Vladislavic's "Portrait With Keys". The voice will be realized by a South African actor under the direction of Minky Schlesinger. In this way, a South African voice will be included, reading an English text full of topographic names, specific words of Johannesburg, showing the unicity of linguistic local sounds. In the score I will certainly integrate some results of my acoustical inquiry in the formal *andamento* and also in sound texture, without, however, using concrete quotations or examples.

*Who did you purposefully seek out? And how did it work out?*

**LR:** I got to know several artists who live in and work on Johannesburg. The huge social commitment of these people is the expression of the most recent history of the city; their works always appear to address the real political problems. In this instance I am thinking of some memorable »tours« we made, for instance with Terry Kurgan to Yeoville (an area on the periphery where predominantly illegal immigrants live), where at the time she was developing her next public project. Along with that were the encounters with Ismail Farouk, who was carrying out a social art project for the Johannesburg

Art Gallery in the Joubert Park area, and with Marcus Neustetter, who was busy with the Hillbrow communities and headed numerous street sculpture projects in public places (in which artists and artisans were involved), or with Bronwyn Lace, who was carrying out a project for street children and making long term investigations on it. I also spent unforgettable days with a Johannesburg trio, two unemployed black sound artists, Thabo Maponya and Mpho Maponya, and a young woman, Zodwa Radebe who at the time was writing her doctorate in anthropology. The three had offered their help in my search for sounds and explained to me the social situation of the Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho from their own perspectives and in their respective townships. From them I experienced how people in South Africa live. They introduced me to their family and friends, artists, musicians and local politicians, they showed me their Johannesburg and it was all with a joy and generosity that I will never forget.

*Which experiences will you most certainly introduce into your composition?*

**LR:** I hope that I will be able to write a composition that will be understood and appreciated by the extraordinary, colourful mixture of people I have met here. Hopefully not too utopian a goal.

*How did you experience your being foreign in this city?*

**LR:** Strangely enough precisely the opposite – I had the feeling that I belonged here, which is probably due in a certain way to everyone being foreign to all the other communities in the city. Nobody feels they are part of a single great community here; which is why they all try automatically to integrate newcomers into their own group, and thereby develop an astounding sense of the problems and needs of the others.

*You had to seek out a small present for the Ensemble Modern, something which for you symbolises the city. Have you found anything suitable?*

**LR:** My souvenir is a mobile of coca-cola bottle tops representing street musicians playing the guitar. I bought it from a couple of children, who like many poor children here, recycle waste products of the first world. I marvel at this object for its immense elegance and because it has been made with such skilful handcraft; aside from that it symbolises the lack of resources and the suffering and poverty of the post apartheid generation.

*Do have the impression you have discovered the essence of the city?*

**LR:** If after such a short intense stay I can say anything at all about the city it is that the constant »movement« is what gives it its charm: the daily, chaotic, bustle of people from the most various of origins »travelling« inside the city