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Albertine, the sound of a verbal universe

In Programmheft Maerzmusik 2008

on *Albertine*

EN

Albertine is a short theatrical piece for solo female voice and whispering male voices, based on Marcel Proust's *Albertine Disparue*. The impossible conversation between the narrating voice (spoken male voices coming from the public) and Albertine (sung solo female voice) is "the subject" of the piece. The departure of Albertine, along the two phases (the fugue and the dead), does not interrupt the virtual, cryptic dialogue: survivors and witnesses give new life and new significance to the evanescent traces left by Albertine. They report to the man the meeting of Albertine and a young laundress, letting us to analyzing the increasing pain felt by him. The concept of jealousy, obsessively treated by Proust in the novel, is coincident with the indecipherable cryptography of the Albertine character. This jealousy developed „in absentia“ becomes a black hole in which the plot is attracted and absorbed until the end, without solution.

The reader's image of Albertine emerges gradually through a series of intimate reports, recollections and thoughts: her identity is a resonant space that has to be filled by our personal imagination, a room that can be perceived only through reverberation.

Apart from the very simple plot, the universe described by Proust is basically verbal, completely detached from any reality shaped by actions in time and space, a kind of verbal research in which the words themselves seem to become characters and are assumed to have their own special adventures, destinies and history. Often the narrating voice becomes trapped: by linguistic accidents, surreal fights and parallel confrontations between the words themselves.

The word "Albertine" in itself has a long history, which one can follow by looking at Proust's preparatory sketches; the metamorphoses and elaborations of this name form a sort of parallel novel that is quite impossible to separate from the story. In essence the character of Albertine is influenced by the „sound phenomenology“ of the name itself: a strong deep open part in the beginning (Albert-), full of memories and echoes (Proust's first fictional love, Gilberte, and his last real lover, Alfred, dead by accident) and a subtle feminine ending, sonically higher (-ine), giving the name its female imprint, a short breath of air in which she vanishes. In the course of Proust's writing of *Récherche* the figure of Albertine absorbed other characters. She is also the only character whose story was left unfinished, incomplete at the time of Proust's death. The dense recherche of Proust about this apparently simple name, represents the pulp, rich in sonorities and significations in which to sculpt the musical lines of this personage.

Words that have a special recurrence in the novel - words used by everyone, anytime - like dead, love, jealousy, have a special treatment in Proust. Progressively they are eroded and destroyed by the use and become skeletons without real signification, objects abandoned along the complex road of the proustian language, describing a sort of diacronicity of the language, a history of the word inside the novel, superimposition of parallel different stories. The

book appears to be a stratified mine where readers can excavate precious diamonds. What is also interesting in Proust's writing is the description of the „corporal“ side of language. His „reportage“ of dialogues is always based on the description of the „words written with invisible ink“ that are implied in expressions, gestures, acts and imperceptible involuntary sounds uttered by the different characters, often in open contradiction with what they are really saying.

Forms, shapes, personifications

The formal development of the piece follows the virtual portraits of Albertine given by the different voices reported by the narrator. In the first part of the novel, the man defines her, describing the pain caused by her absence; in the central part, more physical events are reported: her natural way to move and to act with her girlfriends painted by the letter of a servant. This part is much more based on the sound of the natural ambient Albertine is part of. The voice of the man returns in the third part and Albertine is described as a missing part of himself. Her death, her way to betray his idea of her, causes a lack of knowledge. A dead person speaks no words anymore and the play is only possible by analyzing eroded collective memories.

Albertine represents the attempt to define with a solo voice a character, his dramatic dimension and his individual story. As in the *madrigale rappresentativo* of the Italian Renaissance, the dramaturgy is simply built with the concordance between the voice and the character. This extreme reduction of music theatre to the most basic nucleus is just a way to explore and define the potential possibilities of the vocal writing. In this monastic context, words and music can reach a powerful connection and the virtuosity of the soloist could be stressed to the extreme consequences. What Proust tries to convert in words, sophisticated and subliminal glances and gestures, finds a parallel in the score in the attempt to transcribe and control communicational unconscious sounds. The vocality (vocal style) is intended as expressive amplification and analysis of the spoken language, searching for a sophisticated range of passages from the spoken voice to the sung voice, detailing everything in the score. The composition of *Albertine* started from the search for a solo female singer with the specific characteristics of the Albertine character: the female, young, sensitive, evanescent and indecipherable person the many references of Proust have painted. The score is specifically composed for Anna Prohaska and not only the vocal part is written following the characteristic of her vocal style, but also performing her personal specific presence. The utopic intention was to realize a vocal portrait of her so detailed that a different performer should anyway evoke the expression of her presence. She is supposed to give voice to Albertine, to the young girlfriend she met secretly during her stay in the French country, and also to the two basic landscapes she lived in, the internal marble prison of the apartment where she was confined by the man's jealousy and the external free, windy and sunny shore of the lake. Claudia Doderer has realized for Anna-Albertine a scenic costume that stresses the possible contact between these two women and the attempt to create a temporary „con-fusion“.

Dramaturgy

In the solo voice score the French of the Proust original is reduced to few fragments, repeated with variations, like a subtractive and stretched analysis

of the Proust long development and generation of words. The text of Proust, used as sound material for the solo voice, has then be rebuilt as “hoerbuck” reported by a group of readers, coming from the public side. It will be read in German, the language of the public, in the translation by Eva Rechel-Mertens, giving back, together with the dramaturgy, the first experience of a Proust reader. This is could be intended as the survival of the projectual phase in the definitive work, but also as the sound reconstruction of the deep lake of the proustian language the solo voice text has been extracted. The two realities, the sung French and spoken German, run in parallel and find some unexpected points of contact that became „theatre“ just because are completely disconnected in their timing. The conceptual “meetings” between the solo voice and the spoken voices, in their exposed contrast, shows the pain for the impossible, though deeply desired, contact between the man and Albertine and also refers to the proustian pessimism concerning the obliged social bourgeois play of apparences, a dramaturgical declination of the concept of “diversity”.

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