

**LARS SKOGLUND: Project Description for the Ph.D. programme
in Artistic Research, Norwegian Academy of Music, spring 2018**

The Theatre of Words set to Music

INTRODUCTION – TOPIC

Composers have always worked with words, but not so many composers have written their own texts, and the creation process of doing this simultaneously, opens up new worlds of possibilities. The subject of this doctorate project is **the relationship between music and text** when both are **written by the same person**.

Being a composer for many years, I have mainly worked with instrumental music for the concert format. Simultaneously, I have also written many song lyrics for my rock group Løkbrød. And experiences in recent years where I wrote both libretto and music for two chamber operas, plus set narrated prose text to music has made me want to look closer at this particular phenomenon.

The marriage of text and music is probably as old as music itself, and has taken many forms over the centuries. This project does not aim for a general theory of this vast subject, but is a personal artistic dive into the possibilities the work process where both elements are being simultaneously developed, can offer. The composer's role today is expanding, and is not anymore limited to working only with sound, but to combine different media and create new forms of unities. This project is sympathetic to this line of thought, and the "theatre" in the title should be seen as **a third area** where music and text **interact**. The project is considered successful if both the music and the text contribute to the "theatre" in such ways that none of them can be removed without hurting the end product.

The project will result in one chamber opera, one electro-acoustic piece that also can be called Hörspiel, one short music theatre piece, and one song cycle. With this I intend to explore **the possible relationships between music and text, and how they influence each other; for instance how the presence of one changes the meaning**

and experience of the other, how they can enrich one another in various ways, how they can be read and understood. These and more research questions will be discussed further below.

CONTEXT – RESEARCH QUESTIONS

It is obvious that "music and text" is a wide ranging field, and I can already zoom into the more specific definition **contemporary classical music with text, where the text in some way changes the meaningful content of the work into something different than instrumental absolute music.** This definition will work differently for different listeners; some are more concerned with the words than others, when they experience vocal music. In this project I look for a certain artistic area where the text makes the music "theatrical". Whether for example the presence of Stéphane Mallarmé's poems in Pierre Boulez' *Pli selon pli* makes this piece theatrical; I would argue that they don't. The main focus in that work is in my opinion the beauty of sound and sonic structures for their own sake, and it is not hard to imagine this piece with other words than Mallarmé's. On the other hand, Arnold Schönberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* would clearly be a different piece had the text been different.

My preliminary theory is that this has to do with the use of poetry versus prose. The linearity and development one finds in storytelling is not the same as a "frozen moment" in poetry, which is proven by the fact that composers who set poetry are usually much less worried about the intelligibility of the text than somebody who set prose, and they welcome ambiguity and multiple interpretations. Whereas you need to hear and understand the words in order to know what is going on in **storytelling.**

This is partly true to opera too, but with opera one also finds the cult of listening to the voices of the singers for its own "instrumental" value. The opera audience consists of both those who know all the stories in the librettos, and those who couldn't care less (although they probably know them as well).

My research questions will be: **To what degree does the presence and content of a text influence the overall meaning of the accompanying music? How can the use of text contribute to new musical forms and solutions? What does the music do to**

the text? And more technically: How to compose music, write words and create a fusion in ways that do justice to both partys?

Norwegian composers who have worked with these questions recently are among others Eivind Buene who also writes his own texts, for instance in his prize-winning work *Blue Mountain* for actors and orchestra, where a very strong connection between words and music can be found. The one-of-a-kind "opra-composer" Trond Reinholdtsen creates his own worlds, where film, noise and performance art are commented on continuously in his own texts during his pieces. Henrik Hellstenius has ventured deeply into the sound of spoken language, ranging from the language-philosophical statements of Noam Chomsky to collages of everyday-language in several languages in his *Instrument of Speech* for Ensemble asamisimasa.

Nobel laureate Elfriede Jelinek and composer Olga Neuwirth have collaborated on several occasions, and their operas and not least Hörspiele, such as *Todesraten* and *Der Tod und das Mädchen II* are of high interest here. The German composer Heiner Goebbels has worked extensively with the texts by Heiner Müller, among other projects in the CD-work *SHADOW/Landscape with Argonauts*, where words are not only sung, but also read by people in the streets of New York, giving their spontaneous comments on what they are asked to read, which the composer chose to include, giving a fascinating running commentary to what we hear.

By giving these examples, I hope to make it clear that what the project is opening for is not simply and purely "vocal music"; I have already referred to *the theatrical* as a third area that emerges when music is combined with other elements. Recently in the Norwegian Academy of Music a project called "Music with the real" took place, with composers such as Hellstenius, Carola Bauckholt, Matthew Shlomowitz, Clemens Gadenstätter and others, with the common thread that it looked at what we would call extra-musical elements, often everyday sound, and embedded it inside a sophisticated musical language that we usually know from the tradition that insists on listening to sounds for their own sake, shaped into patterns of beauty and value of their own. Especially Carola Bauckholts music walks the line of this dialectic, such as in her earlier piece *Emil will nicht schlafen* (2010), where a soprano singer performs cries like a baby, creating a very strange double meaning: It is both art and not art at the same time (especially since the crying is sounding very authentic, and not "filtered" to

become more melody-like or musical). The role of the singer in Bauckholt's piece, a "grown up" woman performing as a singer on stage, making extremely life-like children noises becomes truly artificial. Another composer who is often considered as "theatrical" is the German Kagel-student (like Bauckholt) Manos Tsangaris. I admire Tsangaris's work for its sensitivity, intelligence, poeticness, as well as its edge, and especially his focus, that I think often is overlooked, on what he calls the *transcendental* aspect of his events, their *Werk-Charakter*.

The ambition for this project is to be able to participate in this line of thought on the European contemporary music scene.

LITERATURE

Some reference literature can be Carl Dahlhaus' seminal *The Idea of Absolute Music* which is of high interest here. (See literature list for more details.) The American Oulipo novelist Harry Mathews' (who initially was trained as a conductor) published the amusing and instructive essay "The Monkey at the Wheel", with the maybe surprising thesis that music "wins" in the hierarchy of music and text (in vocal music). Erling E. Guldbrandsen's research on Boulez's Mallarmé interpretations in *Pli selon pli* are thoughtful and interesting, not at least from a technical point of view. Tom Sutcliffe's *Believing in Opera* is also of interest, with its focus on opera directing as a possible room for innovation, which understandably comes from an interest in what actually happens in the libretti.

An influential text on the emerging theatrical music and the expanded role of the composer is *Composed Theatre*, edited by Matthias Rebstock and David Roesner. Finally, a book on experimental literature that I will use in detail is Tom LeClair's *The Art of Excess*, where so-called system novels, and writers like Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover and Ursula Le Guin are presented and analyzed. LeClair's thesis is that the confusion that arises when meeting unusual art can cause a redirection and reassessment of the world around us, it may change our perceptions and judgements, and may thus be said to be a kind of enlightenment project. A good reason to experiment!

METHOD – ARTISTIC AMBITION – REFLECTION

Now it is time to speak more of our own take on this issue. I mentioned the difference of poetry and prose, and consider **storytelling** a keyword in the use of text. One reason for choosing for lineary narratives is that they go places, they change, they have a timeline, which music also has. The playwright Tale Næss said in an interview, quoted from memory, that performative text (scenetekst), as opposed to literary text, is always characterised by an *event*. Something happens here and now; something is going on and then it changes. – Texts for music pieces can be constructed with this formula in mind.

I also think the concept of performative text is interesting because it is supposed to *leave out* things; to leave room for participation from the other partys, such as the actors, music or sound design, the directing, use of space, use of movement.

The texts I plan to write for this will continue with my dive into ordinary language and life situations that are easily recognizable (see attachments), and then with a twist added to it at some point. The project will focus on prose and storytelling, and look to musical forms that are supporting the narrative. But I am enough of a modernist to agree with Morton Feldman that "it is the unorganic moments we remember", and a dialectic between flow and interruptions will certainly take place. A sort of everyday realism is especially well suited to develop into something that turns upside down or inside out, since the starting point is so familiar, and the development easily can be followed.

As a working method for generating text that is close to ordinary everyday speech, I plan to – as a starting point – use verbal improvisations, which is a good source for the sound of spoken language.

I will study the works of others, such as all the contemporary composers mentioned earlier, as well as 20th century operas and vocal works where the composers wrote their own texts, such as Janacek, Stockhausen, Schönberg, Messiaen.

The music and the words will be created simultaneously, with their developments running parallel, in an attempt to ensure that they remain equal in the hierarchy of the pieces. Whether this will occur or not remains to see, and is part of the artistic research. And before this stage, the very definition of such "hierarchies" is also important.

Being a native Norwegian speaker myself, writing everyday-language texts in English, such as the planned radio play, is a challenge, and I will make use of the expertise of the three American musicians who commissioned it, in order to seek authenticity.

For the interaction of music and words the project has some preliminary work hypotheses or mottos, that will be further developed as the research proceeds:

1. Music deepens the message. To set a text is to interpret it. In my chamber opera *En reise til Sri Lanka* which takes place in a library, I make all the singers and instrumentalists sing and play at a very hushed volume most of the time. The story is about the things we don't dare to say, and here the choice of location and the musical solution contribute a layer that makes it almost tangible.

2. The text can make us compose in a different way than before. Again, if we with "text" open up for other elements, as in our image of the "theatre/third area", it is instructive to think of the young Stravinsky's musical innovations in his early ballet music. The demands of the situations on stage made him come up with a music that would not have fitted into the form-thinking of the classical instrumental music of his time. We also mentioned Boulez' *Pli selon pli*, and what he did with melismatic prolongation of monosyllabic words there, thus creating a new vocal style (in its time), should be an example of how this can happen on the detail level in composition.

In my own work, the piece *Plateaux* (see attachments) went places I had never imagined when I added lyrics to something that started as a kind of percussion concerto. This experience is a huge motivation for wanting to continue in this direction with this project.

3. We want to do something else. A motivation not to be overlooked, especially where younger artists (born after 1970?) meet. Putting yourself in unknown surroundings can challenge your reflex reactions, and what you thought of as carved in stone is seen in all its relativity.

RESULTS

The project will result in: An **opera**, a short **music theatre piece** (which is something else than opera), a **radio play** and a **song cycle**. So far, I have appointments with the

singers Johanna Zimmer, a member of Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart, and Halvor Festervoll Melien. A percussion trio consisting of Jennifer Torrence, Oslo, Bonnie Whiting, University of Washington and Cory Hill of the Los Angeles Percussion Quartet have asked me to write a Hörspiel that will be published online, where the musicians speak, play and act as foley artists. Also the Norwegian ensemble Cikada have said yes to participate in this doctorate project, further planning will decide where and how their contribution can fit in.

I also do pre-projects this spring with two shorter pieces for the trio Stillae (soprano, flute, guitar) and Norwegian Cornett & Sackbut (soprano, zink, two sackbuts and percussion) that I call micro-operas. The latter is shown in Periferien in August.

The official presentation and publication of the results will be in The Research Catalogue, in performances in and out of the Music Academy, and I hope to be able to release a CD. Continuous sound documentation will be done by myself in the Academy's recording studio, which I have used a lot during my Master studies. Participation in the Fellowship Programme will of course take place, and I will try to get the work shown at festivals such as Ultima, Borealis (where my chamber opera was premiered this spring), Ilios, and venues like Sentralen, Ny musikk and similar stages around the country. In Darmstadt a new presentation room where artistic research is presented almost as an own "genre" starts this summer, and this development will be interesting to follow and present own research at, as well as other international conferences and seminars. Theatre festivals and venues are also possible, such as Oslo's Black Box and Dramatikkens Hus.

For the actual text writing it will be important to have contact with expertise in this, perhaps visit writing courses, such as those in Bergen, Bø or Tromsø, or abroad.

As supervisors I would like to suggest Henrik Hellstenius from the Academy, and Manos Tsangaris from the University of Dresden. It will also be important to have somebody with a deep knowledge of literature on the team, and I suggest the Belgian author Gaea Schoeters, who has written both novels and opera librettos.

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