

On gestures and to be in one's element

Reflections on the solo performance *Im Element* in the form of a restored interview

Stockholm,
15 June 2016

Supervisor Rolf Hughes and I are re-viewing a recording of the live performance *Im Element* [In the element] which took place at the gallery KunstHaus Potsdam on 5 June 2016 on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition titled *Künstlerhaus Schloß Wiepersdorf: Ein interdisziplinäres Festival mit Kunst, Musik, Literatur und Film*. The main question that the piece aims to reveal is *what is the element one is in when performing*. When reading critiques on performances of music pieces or theatre plays, there is often this saying, in German language, that a musician or actor, during this part or that scene, *is in her/his element*. (In German the originating, but invented quote would be: "In diesem Satz oder in jener Szene ist die/der MusikerIn oder die/der SchauspielerIn *in seinem Element*.") In other words, the musician or actor fully immerses in the music or the character played. S/he is no longer trying to achieve something, but *is truly in the—her/his—moment*. The musician *becomes* the music or the actor *becomes* the character played.

Here are the revised and elaborated notes that I took on 15 June 2016 during a supervision session together with Rolf Hughes discussing the documentation of the performance *Im Element*:

RH: I see choreographic, architectural aspects. The gesture creates spaces in which the performer situates the changing sounds.

AN: yes, and in addition to this, gestures also have the potential to become a co-player, a source of inspiration.

RH: How do you evaluate your performance of *Im Element* now that you have seen and heard the recording for the first time?

AN: Oh, that's a difficult question since it triggers a lot of different layers of thoughts. So, it's going to be a long answer if you don't mind. Usually I'm tending to be over-critical to my performative outcomes, but in this case the overall sound is better than I remember. In my recollection the space was terribly reverberant. I was thinking what an awful, unfocussed performance situation this is and, in consequence, asking myself how to get through. Usually a reverberant space can be useful for the singing voice to enhance the production of the harmonics which, in regards to the classical singing voice for example, helps to create a bright, full and rich sound. But sounds, created unvoluntarily by the audience, are also being amplified, in such a space. I remember that the situation was a troubled one. While the performance already started audience members were still entering the gallery space making slurping sounds and creating a noisy atmosphere. Of course, in a musical performance situation people are always coughing and kids are laughing, etc. But the sound condition of this space wasn't the one to create a compelling performance, I thought. That's why I started to sing a tone in silence, creating no sound at all. I just pretended to sing and made the whole process of singing only visible hoping to create a more focussed atmosphere. While mimicking the singing process of breathing in, opening mouth, raising arms, etc. I tried to calm down both the audience and myself. Not sure if I succeeded.

In any case, what seems to be interesting to note is that, when performing, there is always an internal 'debate' going on no matter if you're interpreting or improvising. In this case, I asked myself how can I change the situation given by a noisy atmosphere and a 'boomy' acoustics. The internal discussion of the performer now comes into play which, above all, as I claim, is the unconditional condition to perform. The performer needs to permanently analyse of what's going on in the moment. It's a prerequisite for instantaneous creation and, at the same time, bringing the momentarily created results into a broader time perspective. The inner dialogue is necessary for *shaping of the moment* (which was, by the way, also the title for the opera conference at the Stockholm University of the Arts initiated and organised by Johanna Garpe in

January 2016). Returning to your question on what I would criticise when reviewing the performance, I have to say that there are some issues with the overall composition. But the causes again lie in the atmosphere I was dealing with, fully absorbing my attention. Maybe the recipient watching the video would not agree, but, as I remember, I was struggling to create a coherent flow as opposed to go from one sonic element to another. Some of the juxtapositions of different vocal techniques appear to be too harsh. They weren't introduced sufficiently which always bears the danger of creating clichés. The performance, in my eyes, also lacks of ease and malleability. But then again, you ask yourself, how do I get from one moment to the next realising that another visitor is just arriving making the entry door squeak while, at the same time I'm busy shaping the transition from the countertenor to the subharmonic singing voice in the 'smoothest' way possible... Now, the internal agenda—the inner dialogue that accompanies every musical and sonic creation process—forms the basis to find solutions to the problem raised. One solution, which often is the case, is to develop some kind of ignorance to the situation and the audience. By allowing this to oneself, the performer lowers or even blocks her/his sensibility. This is obviously no real solution. What one can do, if the specific performance situation allows it, is to transform the energetic atmosphere as given into its contrary, to make the situation agreeable and to make music instead of being busy with solving the conditions of a space that cannot be solved anyway.

Another thought that comes to my mind when revisiting the performance is the question concerning gestuality in vocal performances and, in particular, how the gesture can support the performance act to create sound transitions as smooth as possible. In fact, there are quite a few moments when gestures kick in and fill sonic and/or musical gaps. The array of effectiveness caused by gestuality is big and ranges from being very helpful and supporting the vocal sound production to, in contrast, being annoying and disturbing the momentum. When one studies classical singing, in the realm of the *Kunstlieder* like those by classical composer Franz Schubert, as I did almost twenty years ago, the student is told to be very cautious about the timing of when to apply gestures. It is in

this context that they are considered to be an 'additional component' to the overall vocal and musical performance. The conceptual thinking behind is clear: *everything goes into the voice*, meaning that everything has an influence on the voice. In other words, for the performer at the first instance, gestures have a tremendous impact on the creation process. On the second level, following a thought by Heraclitus who said that 'eyes are better witnesses than ears' (Cavarero, p. 37), it's the gestural vocabulary applied that has the potential of 'steering' the reception of the vocal performance. It's not a secret that, in Western cultures, the eyes are dominating all other senses. So, why not using the possibility of enhancing the outcome of the vocal performance by applying gestures and, in so doing, underlining the sonic and musical statements. It is actually here at this juncture that the performer's responsibility comes into play. For this needs to be done very tastefully. It's an act of balancing, like singing itself is, and of developing a sense of proportion. Only then are the premises made to create a coherent and, hopefully, compelling vocal performance. Whoo—quite a challenge and a lot to think about for the vocal performer, I know. But it is important to incorporate these thoughts if applying gestures as a plausible form to support the composition. And that's exactly what I have some problems with when re-watching and re-listening the documentation of the performance *Im Element*.

Having said this, on the other hand, the performer has to develop some kind of indulgence to oneself, because we need to acknowledge the fact that every performance situation differs from the previous and following one. There is the daily mental and physical constitution of the performer to be taken into account. The given acoustic frame works of the venue space and its specific acoustics have a considerable impact on the performance outcome. Even the space is the same its conditions are changing each time depending on whether it's a rehearsal without an audience or a public presentation. For, due to its mere presence, the audience changes the acoustics of a space enormously. Finally, let's not forget that also nonverbal interaction between audience and performer is taking place being being different each performance.

RH: Returning to the question of gestures in performances, they demonstrate the potential to create *haptic spaces* that touch on a supplementary level.

AN: Yes, indeed. There is an additional, almost unconscious layer in play when looking at the gestures. But concerns also other aspects of the performance. The red towel, f.i., which is hanging over the note stand to put down the singing bowl without any sound, became much stronger than I actually thought it was. I'm raised in a catholic environment. So, for me the red towel is somewhat alluding to the service in the church. At the same time, I was using the singing bowl related to Tibetan culture and singing subharmonics similar to Tibetan monk chanting. Therefore, the performance, doesn't only reveal haptic, but also spiritual spaces which I have a hard time to denote even it may be clear if observed from the outside. To me, the piece *Im Element* draws on spheres that I'm not able to translate properly into an appropriate language. What I can say though, is that *to be in one's element*—something that very rarely happens by the way—has a spiritual dimension that I cannot really grasp in words when I'm trying to paraphrase my intentions by comparing them to the actual outcome as it manifests itself in a video documentation. Maybe this is the reason why I'm doing what I'm doing, i.e. performing in the realm of vocal arts. It's precisely this shortcoming which makes me mistrust and not rely on language. Words don't seem to be sufficient enough to describe or paraphrase what's happening during such a vocal performance. In addition, I also mistrust the video documentation as such to be sufficient enough to convey what is happening during a performance. It can just give a slight sense of the actual performance content.

What has become clear to me, now that I'm reflecting upon the performance, is that, applying the red cloth in the performance, I probably intended to make an ironic statement on the obsolescence of church services as I got to know during my childhood. At the same time, my desire to evoke moments of spirituality during my performances, obviously did not fade. It seems that irony is the

mask which, hiding the real face, conceals all that what we are really after and don't allow to admit to ourselves.