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arts

Why my concert performances are so fucking good.

Otmar Wagner

1. Musical Socialisation

When I was a child, luckily, they didn't do Early Years Music – no singing dwarves, no dancing mice, no twanging cloudlets, no musical frog lessons. Instead we got cultural mash-up 70s-style: Mireille Mathieu and Nana Mouskouri on family TV of a Saturday night. And obviously also we got village brass – the “Youth Orchestra of the Königshofen Kolping Society.” In those days it wasn't so much “would you like to” or “could you?” Rather more: “You must” and “You are allowed to.” I was allowed to play the tenor horn, quite my parents' little offshoot. Good memories: year-end concerts featuring Johann Strauss and Beatles medleys, not to mention the Imperial Army March on Remembrance Day, played in front of the war memorial outside the village church to those who had fallen in the First and Second World Wars. Equally unforgettable – the singular smell of “Sidol,” which I employed before each performance to polish my tenor horn to its sparkling best. Much better than petrol.

Then of course there was also the twin-turntable record-player with built-in loudspeakers, and the accompanying amusing record collection of my parents: Slavko Avsenik & the Original Oberkrainer, the obligatory golden boy Heintje (Simons) (for me, the beaming exemplar and musical equivalent of the kid on the Ferrero Rocher children's chocolate box), but above all there were

all those FORGETMENOT records and records from the TV show THE BIG PRIZE, eight deutschmarks a shot and two deutschmarks for "Aktion Sorgenkind" (a charity). Featuring hits by Roy Black, Alexandra, Wencke Myhre, Katja Ebstein, Freddy Quinn, Cindy & Bert, Rex Gildo, Tony Marshall, Peggy March and many more. The pick of the bunch was the 1975 release from THE BIG PRIZE. The first track featured Wim Thoelke commentating on a motor race with three separate finishes, on which one could place bets. Made possible by the existence of three separate record grooves interlaced with each other like snails – depending on which groove you lucked into with the needle at the start, you got a different race result.

My first real passion was reggae – and in my case the whole shebang: Roots Reggae by Dennis Brown and Black Uhuru, Dub-Reggae by Prince Far I, Mikey Dread und Dub Syndicate, Ras Michael & the Sons of Negus, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Burning Spear, Yellowman; and Psychedelic Dub by African Head Charge. That sort of stuff. We didn't smoke joints. Instead I drank apple wine and coke mixed with beer with my white male heterosexual mates. Thereafter came the usual: Supertramp, Gustav Mahler, Einstürzende Neubauten, Johann Sebastian Bach's cello suites, Sonic Youth, Zbigniew Penhersi, Toure Kunda, the opening of the first movement of Antonio Vivaldis L'Inverno (op. 8, RV 297), Nine Inch Nails, 'Rut' by Nox (work at both 33 and 45 rpm), PJ Harvey, Henryk Mikołaj Górecki, Yma Sumac, 'Child in Time' by Deep Purple live in Osaka, Somei Satoh, the legendary drawing of breath by Mario del Monaco shortly before the end of the despairing aria 'Vesti la giubba' from the 'Pagliacci Performance' of 1961 in Tokyo, John Zorn, Chilly Gonzales. And then all that arty nonsense: La Monte Young, John Giorno's early stuff, John Cage's 'Mushrooms et Variationes' reading in Cologne, 'Fly' by Yoko Ono, Die tödliche Doris. Nowadays it's more: the humming of the refrigerator in my flat's kitchen, the whispering of electric pylons in the fields, scraps of long-distance conversation from outside on the pavement.

2. The Performative Production of Sounds

I developed an interest quite early on in the sound machines of baroque theatre (wind cylinders, thunder waggons, rain drums and so forth), and in mechanical and electro-mechanical sound objects – ‘Fluxus’ concerts, George Brecht’s ‘Drip Music’, Milan Knizak’s ‘Broken Music’, Tom Marioni’s ‘Piss Piece,’ in the wayward process, both destructive and constructive, inherent in the relationship between body and object (= instrument). I dedicated whole lectures and one long performative night to the History of the Destruction of Guitars. I have developed pedal-powered record-players for my installations and performances, tape players coupled to my body, and a MIDI-driven sound system smashed up into its constituent buttons, switches and sensors. All of which was not so much about discovering an artistic style, as about my interest in Play.

3. Somewhere along the line, I started singing...

...that is to say, I began to develop texts and to work on texts – alien to song – by singing them. I was most inspired by Bruce Chatwin’s description of the Aborigines and their “Songlines” – he describes how aboriginal peoples mark out their physical territory by means of song, whatever that may mean.

From this beginning evolved my idea of “TERRITORIES WHICH MUST BE SUNG”: my territories are texts, themes and utopian cartographies by means of which I think through my own self, or through which I place myself in thinking motion. They are not physical spaces but mental ones, “virtual” rooms. I stake them out, or rather: I incorporate them into myself by singing them, or indeed exorcise them in song.

In my essay and concert performances I have “exorcised” philosophical, political, sociological and military texts: Donna Haraway, Slavoj Žižek, the political defence guidelines of the German Army, Ludwig Feuerbach, the transhumanists, Friedrich Schlegel’s differential principle, press releases from the German motorcar-manufacturing industry, Alexander Schuller, Jean

Baudrillard etc.. I do not need to sing Martin Heidegger, though: he sings in his own lectures when he speaks.

In the strictest sense it is not really about singing for me, but about transformation, pitiless corporealisation and aesthetification, and alongside those also about a fundamental artistic attitude: about a strategy of “WILFULNESS,” which I regard as more politically charged than an art which is expressly political.

4. So what exactly is a Concert Performance?

When I consciously engage with structures of song, or of the concert, I do it not as a musician, which I am not, but rather as a person recognising the plasticity of space. Frequently I will perceive a song that I've heard as a sculptural unfolding in time before my inner eyes, that is therefore as a form of a performative act, which might cautiously be compared with Roman Signer's or Paul Cea-lis' “little events.”

In this sense my songs have little immediately to do with musically harmonious work; rather, they are about working on a plastic-scenic event contained within a short unit of time. If I combine a series of these time units and compose them dramaturgically, then that is what I mean by a Concert Performance. That is different from theatre evenings or performance evenings that follow a story, a theme or a red thread. Then again, I also give myself the freedom to ignore the conventional templates for songs and concert recitals, even while making use of some of their aspects.

The song/concert structure allows me to think in the smallest, self-(en)closing units, both in terms of content and form. Each song for me is about the consolidation of a theme, a scenic moment, or a performative act. I'm interested in the field of tension between the repetitive structure of the song (melody, refrain) and its complement, that which relates to the “little event”: the tipping point of surprise, the sudden plot-twist, falling down, or over, or away.

If a concert is initially the sum of its self-(en)closing songs, it is also the case that its assembly is subject to an internal logic, one which for example is built from and frequently intuitively results from musical structures, scenic action, potential thematic relationships and so on.

What most interests me here is the associative bridge-building between the units, which can be imagined in a significantly freer and more radical way in a hypothetically assumed concert structure than it could for instance in the structure of a themed evening – it's often the case that something else is going on (a piece of text, of action) in between the songs in my Concert Performances, which initially perhaps appears to be a bridge, or an excursion, but which then itself suddenly mutates to be “song”.

At heart this is not for me about the performance or presentation of artistic virtuosity, but about working oneself to the death at a chosen form – that is, making space in the performative act for open-ness, fragility, contradictions. My term for this is “Professional Dilettantism.” And if someone tries to be funny about that, I respond merely that: THE ILLUSION OF PERFECTION IS A CONCERN OF THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES, AND NOT OF ART.

Otmar Wagner was a guest performer at WUK in 2017 with his “Wunde Welt Zyklus” (Weary World Cycle), followed in 2018 by “Wunde Welt #Ende” (Weary World #TheEnd) and his sound installation “FORTUNA. Sport Kunst Politik” (FORTUNA. Sport, Art, Politics). In February 2019 you can catch him again in the WUK programme with a new work.