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Autor: Pasiecznik, Monika / Tsangaris, Manos
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Scenic Anthropology

An Interview with Manos Tsangaris

Monika Pasiecznik



«Vivarium. Reisen, Kochen, Zoo ...» at the International Summer Course for New Music in Darmstadt 2012, performed by the Ensemble El Perro Andaluz. Photo: Daniel Pufe

Monika Pasiecznik: We started our meeting with a musical excerpt from your piece Winzig, a collection of music theatre miniatures. Does it make sense just to listen to it without any visual elements? This is no self-contained music, but musical theatre.

Manos Tsangaris: The question is natural and important for me in general. For a start I must admit that there is some sort of contradiction. It is not meant to be music in the way we are listening to it now. From the very beginning, some 30-35 years ago, I have been writing situations for listeners and also for

watchers. The conditions of our daily life which build up the complex contextualization for these situations have become a basic condition of my work. Nowadays I call it, just for fun, a "scenic anthropology". *Skene* in Ancient Greek means "tent", so before it became a hut or a stage it was a tent. I think that our consciousness in daily life functions like that: it creates tent-scenes. This is why so many people can use iPads, mp3 players, etc. Of course, I'm only interested in art, I don't want to mix things up and say "life is art". I am interested in how the work builds its own tent, so to speak. I'm also interested in

perception, the situation of the watcher and the listener nowadays in rather intimate contexts. At home you have your laptop, smartphone and perhaps also television, friends in the room next door. These small public events in our private rooms are also very political. It is by accident that my music is just being played. Radio presenters need to broadcast it and I say: OK. It pretends to be music, but it is not.

What is music to you and where is the point when it starts to become something else?

For me it's all about composition. I don't feel bad about hearing it as pure sound. Since the 19th century, music has been something that is meant to be abstract, inside a concert ritual, basically meant only to be heard. This is of course a great development, a great invention of our culture. I wouldn't get rid of it, I love going to concerts. But meanwhile this development has become kind of absurd. What is music? Sound is available everywhere. In Germany people have 240 minutes of sound a day on average – in commercials, films, television, in daily life. If you really like music, you can feel forced to think: what does it mean, in its emphatic sense? Is it that I want to play my favourite Beethoven on a CD player now, and then a telephone rings and I do stop and go to answer the phone ... Where is the work, where is art?

From my beginnings in the 1970s I found it simply necessary to reflect on the working conditions of music. And what does it mean, the "conditions of music"? There are loudspeakers for example. The concert situation is quite exotic. Of course people are still going to concerts, just as, fortunately, they are reading books, but it's only a special segment of the public, and a matter of perception. For me a concert is the way it is composed: at first the sense of space and spatial things, but also the sound, which is the main part of a concert.

You almost never compose music in the traditional sense, such as pieces for specific line-ups, e.g. for ensemble or orchestra – to be played and listened to. Do you feel uneasy within this traditional concert situation? Are your pieces a critique of it?

I have written quite a lot of traditional pieces with standard instrumentation and for regular line-ups – because it's what I can get. Someone asks me, "could you please write a piece for an ensemble?" And I answer "yes" and immediately think: "maybe I can also add two singers or an actor, an engineer, etc." It is very pragmatic in a way. I would say at the same time "yes" and "no". As a listener I love the concert situation, but as a writer and composer I got bored after a while, or maybe even from the very start in fact – I'm not satisfied and I want more. For me as an artist, the concert situation is too formalized, standardized. But it's also good, that standard. We have an ensemble culture in modern music which wasn't present 40-50 years ago. Ensemble music is a kind of new genre which has developed and that's great! There are so many young people really skilled to play the strangest things, it's both amazing and dangerous. Some people love to do strange things and musicians are treated like reading machines.

How do you start to invent your atypical concert situations?

How do you compose all elements in your music theatre?

The first thing I do is imagine a space. All things come together as a spatial music. I think the space itself is musical. Even if it seems to be a static one, the room can get very dynamic by adding little things. If it's dark and you have only one little light, you can switch it on and off, even without sound. That's enough to arrange a situation in a rhythm. This is what interests me very much. The very first piece I wrote was *Studie* for one person and some light. No sound, it would be too much. I needed something very pure in the beginning. Recently I thought that maybe in the coming years I will go back to it and make something very small for light sources. But then you have a heterogeneous situation – of course I have also written for orchestra, for choirs (plus subway trains; I did an opera in a subway station called *Orpheus, Zwischenspiele*). *Bathsheba. Eat The History!* was a 24-hour opera for big orchestra, choir and actors in several places. It was huge! But the main thing for me is to compose the spatial quality of music in itself or the musical quality of space. It is very romantic. Novalis said that music, poetry and graphic arts are one unique phenomenon.

And what is the place of text in your musical-spatial compositions? You are a poet!

It changes. For instance, a violin is not always a violin – in every piece the instrument has a completely different function. In the Warsaw version of *Vivarium* the text had a prominent place in the beginning. People were saying words in between the musical structure. Little phrases sounded too: *cantare, parlando, reading* ... The beginning of *Vivarium*, with Marcin as the speaker, was something like a typical, fake theatre situation: he came and behaved like a theatre or festival director who has to make an announcement before the piece actually starts. It's a kind of guide to the piece. He is something between a director and a crazy scientist who cannot get rid of his thoughts; who reflects the cultural background of what we are dealing with. He comes back at the very end and gives some reflections on the zoo ... In between there are little phrases sung – especially in the cooking scene, where we have a dialogue for two singers about cannibalism. It is a very short concentrated commentary on birds eating one another. Did you know that if you have thousands of turkeys on a farm, they get neurotic and start pecking each other? It's a kind of cannibalism – I used this word in the scene with cooking.

I very much like the idea of opera. I don't want to reject opera. Is *Die Zauberflöte* an opera, for example? The idea of a play based on singing and acting is OK. It's also a very romantic idea. I like it, it's not absolute!

You mentioned the speaker – at certain points he makes many aesthetic statements in his lecture, for example about the aim of art, its relation to reality ... Does he speak seriously or is it only a joke about the discourse of art, the sophisticated jargon of aesthetics, the ways of speaking about art? I mean: are these aesthetic questions an important topic for you?

I'm not against humour, however I'm serious about it. I like to have different colours, mental aspects. It's both, I would say: a little ironic about how we think, which in one word is like Rilke or Stravinsky. I found this aspect of language fantastic, the miracle of thought. I can say 'football stadium' and we see red and white squares (in Warsaw nowadays because of the new stadium in red and white). How fast I can go to the Himalayas, the film runs so quickly. I have loved theory since I was a child. I started to read Lenin when I was eleven. Of course I'm not a scientist in the strict sense. But I like reading a lot of theoretical stuff. It's part of my work. I ask myself: what should I compose, why so and so?

The title Vivarium means 'a place of living'. The term is normally used for a kind of closed space created to observe or study plants or animals. In your piece we have people: musicians and actors. It's a kind of 'life laboratory'. There are also questions about the well-known duality of nature and culture. Did you want to deal with these problems?

Yes. Of course the title is not meant to be stared at as if it were a statue. The subtitle is 'travelling, cooking, zoo'. For example on German television in the last few years there have been three broadcast cycles which became very popular: the first one is about adventure and travelling – people are sitting at home on the sofa and watching people climbing, etc. The second one is about cooking – they sit still on the sofa and eat chips and drink beer, watching star cooks preparing a very special meal. And the third one, which I found special, is about the zoo, but like a day-to-day TV theatre, for example: the penguin has a fever today, what can we do with him? It has already had a pill. And then the lion has toothache. This is the first funny level, and on the second level my piece relates a bit to human history. In the beginning there were just nomads who then became domesticated and started cooking at home with the family. When you see all these situations from the outside, from a distance, it looks like a zoo. People are sitting in those cars of metal – also behaving like animals! Look at the adrenalin, how they get angry because someone is not driving fast enough. It's purely zoological. For me it's obvious I wouldn't separate travelling from cooking and the zoo. It's a continuity.

At the beginning of Vivarium the speaker stresses the workshop situation. What does it mean for you: workshop, experiment, laboratory, open form?

In the few last years it has become fashionable to talk about art the way you talk about the work of a scientist, especially in terms of natural science. Physicists do their experiments in laboratories. I think it's correct because all artistic activity, whenever it happened, even two thousand years ago, was basically experimental. We have some questions, challenges, we are forced to think about theory and to try it out. We prepare an empirical situation to see what happens, how we can manage, what the conclusions are. Those artists I respect. This is a dialectic phenomenon, the interest in *Werkhaftigkeit*, which means that the work itself is still an approach and an idea, and afterwards you get a piece of art.



Manos Tsangaris in discussion with Monika Pasiecznik. @ Warsaw Autumn Festival archive. Photo: Grzegorz Mart.

On the other hand, it has to be a very lively and at the same time responsible laboratory.

What did you examine in Vivarium, and what conclusion did you come to?

I'm not interested in the frontal situation: here is the audience and there is the stage. Not many of my pieces are like that. This time, however, I decided to write for this kind of conventional setting. Then I saw the room from above like a bird – the whole box with people inside. And this is a 'vivarium', a zoo, as I said. We think everything is very normal, we go to the concert or a theatre performance, we sit down and wait for the event. But if you see it from the outside, it's completely crazy. That distance brings us back to the miracle of life. It's also a matter of death. If we don't have an awareness of mortality, we don't respect the beauty of life. For me it is really the motor for creating art. Of course it's banal, it's a cliché to write against death and mortality, but *memento mori* is the basic condition for creating art in general. At least it has to do with art. Maybe this is the difference between animals and human beings. I'm not sure, but perhaps we can say so. To what extent do elephants have an awareness of death? They have death rituals ...

You mentioned in the beginning that the perception of music is an important topic in your art. What is the place of the intended recipient in your compositions?

There are so many characters among them, fortunately. I very much respect those people who achieve a completely objective relationship to the whole setting. For me it was

always important to deal with the typical visitor at an event. It's also a spatial experience – I imagine I enter the room, sit down, perceive distances, establish relations with the other people around me. And then it starts. I call it – for fun – “scenic anthropology”: how our social and political constructs deal with different systems of perception. Of course this is what art is about. I wrote many pieces for a small audience – *Winzig* was one of them. The very first – from 1980 – was for one person from the audience and could only be done once. Someone enters a dark room in which an invisible ensemble is placed. I'm very much interested in this kind of event. Normally the audience is a kind of mass, and we as artists are individuals. It's a kind of confrontation. And I imagine that on this single chair only one person is sitting only one person and I can compose the distances, the dynamic movement, the room – specifically with relation to his position. This is still what interests me nowadays because it's outside this circuit of us-and-them. Music is exactly where you are sitting, in the head of the listener, not where I'm playing it. This is an important difference, a laboratory in itself! I wrote this piece in 1980 and then ca. 13 years later came the next step – *Theater für ein Haus* just for small audiences, e.g. two or three people in an elevator. The way you can enter each piece is a part of the work itself: you just look through a spyhole to witness one of them; in another you sit in the middle of the room and the ensemble is playing around you. At this moment the way of listening becomes an integral part of the piece. It's not just an accident or something added. Something is happening and the way we perceive it can change it.

A laboratory of listening! It's amazing how our behaviour has changed, also from a historical perspective. It's an interesting sociological observation about ways of doing something that Adorno called “structural listening”. In the 17th-18th centuries people used to walk around and chat to each other during a concert. Subsequently, in the 19th century, listening gradually became a conscious, intimate experience, enhanced additionally by turning off the lights... Nowadays we concentrate intensely on the musical structure, while listening we try to understand the way the piece was composed and what the idea of the music is ... Many people, however, want to get out of this ‘normal’ concert situation ... I wonder, how do you personally prefer to listen to music?

It's like asking what my favourite food is! I like eating, now a cake, in the evening maybe some salad. I don't think we have a kind of linear development or progress in listening; it's rather a large sphere in which also nowadays we have different kinds of music. Sometimes I listen to contemporary compositions at home on my laptop; I like YouTube as a source where I can find

Lutosławski's works, for example. There is also a lot of shit, but at the same time modern compositions. You don't eat only chocolate every day. Of course, the problem is very interesting. Now we are forced to think about our situation in the context of all-penetrating media. It's really hard to survive spiritually, mentally and intellectually. In every place we have touch-screens; monkeys scratch themselves, we touch our iPads. This is part of the evolution: we want to have something new. Society is addicted to stuff like that. I think it's a kind of survival training to be in contact with the arts. All the signals call us: “look at me!”, “buy me!”, “listen to this!” The question is where we ourselves are in all this. I don't believe in identity, but in the necessity of identification. That is a difference.

The new media change our perception, we cannot concentrate for a longer time on one thing. That's a challenge also for artists, who have to keep the attention of their audiences for a period of time. Isn't this tendency to visualize music, to dramatize a concert, an element of audio-visual culture and sometimes also a desperate attempt to react to the need for intense, diverse sensory stimuli?

The question seems to be simple, but it's more difficult. It's rather the case of an analogue experimental film which has become so radical that you can leave out the film. For me, my reaction in the beginning was to experiment with the technological situation. Where is music now? What are we doing as musicians? My colleagues were writing string quartets and I resisted it. I wanted to examine the situation of a human being in the middle of all this. Now I write huge pieces sometimes, but originally I felt that so many composers steal time pretending to do what the audience expects. The next masterpiece is coming: Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, Schoenberg, Stockhausen, and then me ... Every new piece calls: “listen to me, I'm a new masterpiece!” And this masterpiece seems to take 60 minutes, even if it takes 12 ... So in the beginning I wanted to create something like homeopathic pills: very short pieces, 3'-4', not to steal time. Of course it shouldn't become a mechanism of thinking: we have to be short and audio-visual and commercial. I love long pieces by Morton Feldman, La Monte Young or John Cage's *As Slow as Possible*, which is meant to have a duration of over 600 years. Why not?

Tomasz Zymer helped with the editing process in English. This interview took place on 27 September 2012 at the Austrian Cultural Forum in Warsaw, during the Warsaw Autumn Festival of New Music.