



## “Art can be a laboratory of sorts for life”

An interview with Chaya Czernowin

**Chaya Czernowin:** This creation constitutes one of the rare occasions that I received an external impulse, the suggestion to write an opera based on *FRONT* (2014) by Luk Perceval. I remember the first meeting with Luk, on the occasion of the performance of *FRONT* in Hamburg, as a very odd, exciting one. At the end of our talk, Aviel Cahn too said he had never heard such a conversation about opera before. I was amazed at the openness of Luk Perceval, his sense of adventure in his approach to the theatre work he had done. It knew it could become a particularly pleasant experience: To struggle with him to find a musical language and a theatre language that can interact in an unconventional manner, and, ultimately, using these two media, to make a real statement about... the state of the world.

**The play material of *FRONT* was combined with the novel *Homecoming* by the Chinese author Can Xue into a work entitled *Infinite Now*. Where is the focus in that work?**

**Czernowin:** It is very difficult to summarise what *Infinite Now* is really about. The title refers to the present, but the story elements of *FRONT* are set in the First World War. We like to think that we live in a totally different age compared to the previous century; we like to think of the two World Wars as being frozen in time. But if you take a good look around, you see that the First World War has dramatically changed the landscape and that the Second World War had within it the seeds of all the precarious situations we are seeing now. It was a benchmark of sorts that we did not want but that we could end up with: These things are still going on.

In addition to those problems, there is the surrealistic story of Can Xue, a great Chinese female writer – she is about my age. With the novel *Homecoming*, she wrote a very personal story about dreams and existential fears, about being thrown between moving on or staying in the same place... In this sense, both texts are about being stuck, being blocked in different ways. There are certain feminine ways of being stuck so to speak: Being at home, not being able to get out, while you thought it was temporary, that you could enter and exit at will. The other type of being stuck is what we used to label the masculine way: Being stuck in a war, in a situation and under conditions from which there is no escape. In a sense, *Infinite Now* seeks to get to the bottom of these two situations and to examine what prompts us, nonetheless, to pick up where we left off and to move forward, to continue living, despite all those difficulties.

**You create an unusual sound architecture, a sound landscape also in which all facets of music**

**and sound interconnect in a novel way, appealing not only to the ears, but to all the senses and the whole body. How would you yourself describe the auditory experience of this work?**

**Czernowin:** I take no interest in writing *Literaturoper*, nor am I interested in writing engaging, attractive music to make your day more pleasant. There is already a lot of music out there that does that and that is far better than the music I could ever write. But I find it very important to use music also to question and examine our way of listening and hearing. Art can be a laboratory of sorts for life. To my mind, you can learn a great deal, teach yourself new things, you can really grow. That's how I see things and perceive them, and I try to contribute to this innovation. The auditory experience of *Infinite Now* is anti-categorisation, the opposite of parochialism. Look at what the singers do: They don't tell a story, they don't sing arias; they don't perform a radio play. What they do is a mix of these forms of expression. They do something that is so fleeting it resembles sometimes a radio play, sometimes an aria, only to sound like a play. The work moves in a very subtle way through all these areas. In my opinion, this subtlety is lacking in today's world, with all its polarisation, dichotomy, black and white thinking: A or B, A is right, B is wrong. I want to prove that many tissues bind A and B. Nobody's all bad; nobody's all good. Nothing is pure.

**The score is multi-layered and the various musical layers were recorded. Just how many musical layers does the final result consist of?**

**Czernowin:** We have a lot of electronic music which was made at IRCAM Computer Music by my collaborator Carlo Laurenzi. We have six singers and six actors on stage – a superb cast. There is an instrumental quartet consisting of Yaron Deutsch, Nico Couck, Séverine Ballon and Christina Meissner. They are all top musicians: Two guitar players, one of whom plays an electric guitar, and two cellists. And last but not least, there is the orchestra of Opera Vlaanderen, which was truly fantastic to work with. All these forces play their part. It was quite a challenge because the score contains elements that they did not know what they had to sound like. But for the most part the score was excellently received by the members of the orchestra, who were really open to it. Of course, not everybody found their way round it right away, but I believe that from day six, the day we worked on it together, people really began to feel the musical language. Consequently, the recordings of the orchestral parts, which the singers and the conductors needed for their rehearsals, turned out really well.

**Was there also input from the singers? Did they experiment and, most importantly, did this quest leave its marks on the final version?**

**Czernowin:** Absolutely. We have a group of six singers who are not only vocally brilliant, but who are also – and we knew that when we picked them – very cool and intelligent. We would eat together almost every night, and I took into account not only everything they said, but also their personality. Noa Frenkel I have known for many years, but I also got to know the others better and, while I was still writing the opera, during the work process with them, their input was important. Also when I heard them sing the part, it became clear to me where I had to go from there, how I could break open what was already there and add the ingredients the production needed to make the difference.

(Marjolein Craens and Luc Joosten)