

ABOUT THE MUSIC IN *INFINITE NOW*

Eva Van Daele/Luc Joosten

"Imagine that the auditorium, the entire space of the auditorium represents the inside of a head, a heart, a body. The audience is immersed in the functioning of the head/heart/body of a person who is in a tough or hopeless situation, a person who is desperately looking for something to hold on to."

- Chaya Czernowin -

In her compositions, Chaya Czernowin creates sound landscapes of rich diversity and great depth. The composer combines and moulds sounds into unusual colours. Czernowin works on a scale of extremes: Her music varies between details that are hardly observable and movements so slow that they are hard to oversee. In *Infinite Now* she intertwines sound layers from multiple sources. In addition to the traditional orchestra and four solo instrumentalists, she puts singing voices and speakers on stage, and adds a wide range of electronics to form a challenging enigmatic whole.

Also in terms of score, *Infinite Now* is more than a music composition. It is a work that has a scenic situation as the starting point and goal. Actors and singers, each time six, crowd the score and the scene. Czernowin divides the singers into two trios. The first trio consists of mezzo-soprano, countertenor and baritone; the second consists of soprano, contralto and bass. In the trio that is positioned around the countertenor we hear text fragments of the play *FRONT*. The excerpts from the novel *Homecoming* by Can Xue are reserved for the other trio, the most important voice being that of the contralto, who acts in part as the carrier of the central *Homecoming* character. The actors recite mostly fragments and passages of the *FRONT* text, sometimes solo, at other times also simultaneously with the singers. Nowhere are the singing voices reduced to one character. It looks as if Czernowin tries to disconnect the identity of a voice from the character. The performer hardly identifies with the character, not on the narrative level, nor on the emotional level. Paradoxically, the singing voice gets an impersonal character but, precisely because of that, it highlights the personal input of the performer. By having the voices of each trio form a 'meta voice' and not having them engage in dialogue with each other, they merge into a larger inextricable sound whole. In line with this, in *Infinite Now* we rarely hear the traditional carrier of operatic singing, the melodic line. It is rather a network of interlocking voices and shifts in singing technique. This also creates a tension between the semantic level of the sung and spoken text on the one hand, and language on the other hand as a mere sound phenomenon, without making any direct reference to an external or even internal reality.

In previous works too, Czernowin showed her fascination with the human voice in relation to text. In her first work for theatre, *Prima*, she reflects on the impossibility of putting trauma into words. Her second theatrical work, *Zaide/Adama*, which is to be performed with Mozart's *Zaide*, thematises the meeting of languages and how this meeting can create both distance and rapprochement. Now Czernowin lays out her ideas about the human voice in her biggest work to date: An opera in six acts.

In *Infinite Now* Czernowin – as she did in *Adiantum Capillus-Veneris* (2016), described by the composer as 'studies on fragility for voice and breath' – asks the singers to make not only the singing part of their performance, but also the breathing, the speaking and the whispering. For one thing, she explores and uses the transitions between the foundation of the voice and the actual singing.

Breathing constitutes a full component of the structure of the work, and not just preparation for or support of the singing. Respiration results in a vocal neutrality which the singing voice cannot attain because breathing produces a noise which sounds human but not necessarily personal.

A similar level of attention to the way sound is created can be seen in the way the orchestra is treated. Here, too, the instrumentalists are asked to have another good look at their acquired techniques and to determine how the smallest sound elements are generated on the instrument. Several directions in the score – arc directions for the strings, blowing and respiration directions for copper and wood, circular movements for percussion – force the musicians of the orchestra to consider the obviousness and to think about how they can get their familiar instruments to produce new sounds. These kinds of details are typical of the score. Consequently, during the rehearsals for the world premiere, the composer was very involved herself and assisted the singers and musicians in producing the desired sound effects.

The text in *Infinite Now* does not constitute a dramatic narrative but represents situations the characters are in. The singers use primarily smaller text fragments. The manner of text presentation is sometimes quick and concentrated, whilst elsewhere even the smallest phoneme is spread over bars. Like in the music, the broad lines in the text are often stretched, making them only slowly visible. The voices of the actors, too, are a key musical component of Czernowin's composition and are no addition to or explanation of the music. The voices in the pre-recorded electronics are another source of text. The voice of a newsreader confronts us with the outside world, perhaps with a historic event. The noise of a crowd surrounding the spectator reminds us of the fact that the space we are in is bigger than the opera hall. This constitutes a concept of hope: breaking through the claustrophobic space in a reassuring manner. In the fourth act, the electronics play an important role in producing the sound of respiration. This element comes to the fore and sounds physically very nearby, as if we are inside the body that produces the sound.

The fourth act is also the place where both texts, *FRONT* and *Homecoming*, meet. After the first three acts, in which we, the listener, are introduced to the material and try to get a sense of the situation, Czernowin, in the second part of the opera, does not seek a great conciliatory apotheosis that eliminates the foregoing. Nevertheless, a fusion of the various elements appears possible without them losing their individuality. In this way she looks for a possibility to deal with the hopeless situations of the characters. As a consequence, the dramatic line in the opera is in the music rather than in the text.

Heavy metal doors mark the beginning of each new act. They offer the listener structure. This introduction is always followed by a brief instrumental part. Then the singers enter the picture. This pattern is repeated six times. *Infinite Now* immerses the listener in flows of sound that run in time and space. Contrary to what usually happens in an opera hall, the sound comes not only from the stage and the orchestra pit. The listener is surrounded by sound coming from loudspeakers positioned all over the auditorium. This distribution of sound sources makes it possible to determine what direction the sound is coming from and how it moves through the space. This spatialization or spacing of sound is already a key component in a few previous works by Chaya Czernowin. The most extreme example is *HIDDEN* (2014), a work for string quartet and electronics. Here, too, the spectator is surrounded by loudspeakers. This enables Czernowin to use intensified impressions of proximity and distance, moving the sound through the space. This way, during the execution, a space is created which evolves, shrinks and expands as it were. What is remarkable about *Infinite Now* is that this work was conceived for a traditional opera space which contrasts sharply with a flexible, easy to modulate

'black box'. Both the acoustics of the space and the sound expectations of the audience are challenged by this tension.

The loudspeakers positioned around the spectators produce not only the amplified sounds of actors, singers, soloists and the orchestra. A lot of other, less familiar sounds are also introduced in the opera hall. We hear the clapping of bird's wings, the distant noise of a radio, ice sheets sliding over each other ... We hear recordings of voices, sounds associated with nature or industry, and elusive sounds which cannot immediately be identified. They often suggest a certain movement or space, and a threat to *Unheimlichkeit* on the emotional level. Sometimes they evoke images of trauma and recollection by repeating fragments from previous acts.

The parts for the four solo instrumentalists we hear both live and through the loudspeakers, are not characterised by great solo passages. The quartet of guitar, electric guitar and two cellos comes to the fore only every now and then. In the dense sound mass created by the entire orchestra and the electronics the sound of the quartet often stands out. The spacing of these sound masses around the spectator creates an oppressive effect and has a physical impact on the listener. Contrasting with these overwhelming flows of sound but no less impressive are the moments of fragile silence. What is almost constantly present in the opera is an element of alienation – the sense that we don't completely belong in the sound space being created, that we can never fully grasp what's going on. This does not constitute a restriction but precisely demonstrates the richness and complexity of Czernowin's music, which allows for new dimensions to be discovered all the time.

(Eva van Daele & Luc Joosten)