



## Going Abroad and Coming Home in *Infinite Now*.

Luc Joosten

***Infinite Now* by the American-Israeli composer Chaya Czernowin is based on the play *FRONT* by Luk Perceval. The multilingual performance from 2014 was created on the occasion of the commemoration of the First World War. Perceval relied on text material from Erich Maria Remarque's novel *Im Westen nichts Neues*, combining it with excerpts from letters from soldiers on the front line and from *L'enfer* by the French author Henri Barbusse.**

Initially, *Infinite Now* also starts from the First World War, but is certainly not a 'commemorative performance'. It is a work that very consciously opposes a heroic commemoration of the topic of war. No battlefields or canons, no medals or hero worship, no empathic understanding of the suffering in the trenches, nor a glorification of the military cemetery. When Chaya Czernowin saw the performance *FRONT*, she immediately wanted to place a different world opposite Perceval's polyphony for war voices. While the performance *FRONT* remained the starting point for her, her composition is also an extreme comment of sorts on the original take. As a counterbalance, she took the novel *Homecoming*, a short, enigmatic but intense story by the Chinese writer Can Xue about someone who has to come home in a strange, and yet familiar environment. Although *Homecoming*, on the surface, exhibits little affinity with the *FRONT* tale, both stories, at a deeper level, are the expression of a general *condition humaine*. In the composition the *Homecoming* is the basis, above which fragments and flashes of memory from *FRONT* float as it were. The voices, which are still separated at first, gradually permeate each other and form each other's echo. This way, *Infinite Now* juxtaposes characters who are in a totally different position, but who, in essence, all try to find a way out of an intense situation without a clear perspective. They have been thrown into a no man's land and a transitional phase between life and death. In a virtually endless now moment, they are thrown back upon themselves and are faced with their own inner world and foundation.

Using a great multi-layered structure and diversity of sounds and text, Czernowin creates a musical-theatrical landscape in which the radicalness of the war situation is interwoven with the almost banal, yet fundamental, existential issue of coming home. The desire to come home is essential, not only in the trenches, not only to the searching or the fleeing man, but to every human being, all the way to the own family or in themselves.

The contrast between the violent, 'grand' aspect of the war and the vulnerable sensitivity of 'normal' life forms the backdrop to the work. In the performance *Infinite Now* this existential

experience is evoked through the composition and the texts, the voices of singers and actors as well as the scenic action. How do we think and feel as human beings in this vague interim situation? How do we deal with our desires, our hopes, our dreams, our loved ones and our problems in a situation of hopelessness, in a moment of ignorance and faced with the unknown?

Chaya Czernowin's music has a strong physical character. By using sophisticated spacing of the sound in the theatre, the spectator space becomes part of the action space on the stage. The auditory, visual and physical experience together can lead to a form of awareness, a type of introspection or of meditation that is consistent with the thematic material. In six acts, each of which describes a great arc of tension and sometimes culminates in a violent outburst of sound or in total silence, Czernowin stretches the now moment beyond its borders. The oppression produced by the sound alternates with passages of restrained tension and auditory peace. In so doing, Czernowin creates the space in which the memories and thoughts of the characters are conjured up, develop and resound.

For the composer, the search for the moment of beginning of speaking and making music – the transition from breathing, over speaking to singing and the development of a sound on the instrument – constitutes one of the cornerstones of the composition. This way, searching, starting over and hoping to get back to what's familiar find their counterpart in what's musical. Luk Perceval is consistent with this in his scenic language of movement. He requires that the singers and actors be aware of every movement and make their relation to each other and to their own inner tension part of their scenic presence.

*Infinite Now* is certainly not an opera in the traditional sense of the word. Characters, concrete narrative and action, emotional melodic lines, or familiar music dramaturgy are hardly present. The fragmented, the casual, the almost coincidental, but also the crumbling and disruption are prominent in the parameters music, word, action. Yet there are also broad lines laid out and a clear array of sounds and noises returns in the various parts. Nevertheless, in conjunction with the scenic action, this creates a large whole in which the various elements support each other. In this sense, *Infinite Now* is indeed an opera – but not as it is to be expected and anticipated.

"I don't compose entertainment," says Czernowin, "there is enough of that and others are better at it." And Perceval agrees with her: "This work forces us to stop and think and to consciously experience with all of our senses. [...] Here, we ask for a totally different attitude, one that I am convinced is necessary in the culture and the times we live in – an attitude which is no longer cultivated and, therefore, goes against the zeitgeist. But I believe that is also why we create art: To go against the zeitgeist. As they say in Germany: To not give sugar to the monkey."