

9302-LOK

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF HET LOKET ('the ticket counter')

on the new music-theatre composition by Zachàr Laskewicz

HET LOKET
3 - Exposition

Time

Singer 1: Performs symbolic gestures stylistically

Singer 2: (turns to face the audience) *Falsetto, exaggerated gestures* (turns to face the audience) oe! oe! oe! euteu! euteu!

Percussion: Peking Opera gong* (f), Flexatone (f), Auto horn (f), Glockenspiel (mf), Ratchet (f), Whip (f)

Actor 1: Performs following movements: (i) (iii) (ii) (iv) (v) in slow motion

Actor 2: Performs following movements: (i) (ii) (iii) (v) (iv) in slow motion

Time

Singer 1: uu

Singer 2: uu o a i! uu

Percussion: Kettle drum (mf cresc.)

*Beat gong while actors are still bowing

**Short percussive insertions during the pauses

INTRODUCTION

Het Loket is a composition project produced for performance in the New Music Week 1993 Ghent (Belgium). The production of the work was for a concert of new short chamber operas, and certain of the elements within the work were prefigured, including instrumentation, the presence of a small number of vocal forces, and even the text which was necessary to adopt as the 'libretto' (a short play by Tardieu called *Le Proposé*). These conditions were certainly influential as to why the form of an 'anti-opera' was chosen, although the composition attempts to go beyond a simple parody or an attempt at provocative anti-aestheticism. *Het Loket* attempts to explore other means of communication through music and theatre by adopting different musical and theatrical forms that have few or no common links with the operatic tradition. The interaction and collision between these different forms is designed to demonstrate alternative possibilities for communication in the theatre, possibilities that stand against the closure of the opera.

Het Loket is divided into four sections: *Overture*, *Introduction*, *Exposition* and *Conclusion*. In the *Overture* the frame of the musical performance is explored. The *Introduction* begins when the singers walk on stage and go through a process of introducing the instruments, parodying the traditional role of singers in an opera but also presenting a short wordless pantomime. The *Exposition* is the most important structural element within the composition and begins when the two actors walk on stage. Three realities are constantly contrasted in order to point out contrasting communicative forms: The discourse of the opera singers/musicians, the discourse taken from the Tardieu play, and another discourse presenting a teacher teaching a Chinese melody to a younger student. How these discourses relate to one another in the course of the performance is an important factor, and there is a deliberate ambiguity between the realities. The discourse taken from the Tardieu play is a pantomime performed by the actors expressing the incredible difficulty a client has in attracting the attention of the attendant behind the teller, who simply cannot see her. The teacher/student discourse is also performed by the actors on imaginary instruments. The discourse of the opera singers acts as an intermediary between the audience and the story performed by the actors (which is explaining itself without their help). This 'explanatory' function is rendered ridiculous because firstly the language of the male singer consists entirely of nonsense vowel sounds, and secondly the female tries to explain the story through a sort of abstract sign language. They cannot bring the story to a resolution and at the climax of the piece when there is a terrible traffic accident the opera singers are left to do what always seems to happen to the heroes and heroines of an opera performance: Die.

BACKGROUND

For the production of the chamber operas the composers were required to use texts from a selection of short plays by a French absurdist playwright - Jean Tardieu, and adopt it as a libretto for a short 'absurd' chamber opera. *Le Préposé* ('the teller') was chosen for the composition in question because of the broader potential of some of the themes involved. Otherwise the text was considered extremely unsatisfactory for presentation in the theatre, involved with metaphorical language and narrative that would certainly seem outdated because of the strong existential nature of the thematic material. A client approaches a teller behind which a railway attendant sits, and asks for information concerning the next train. Through a series of wordy encounters where the client has extreme difficulty in asking questions just as the attendant seems completely unable or unwilling to answer, we discover that the client is actually seeking answers to very impossible questions about the nature of his life and existence. The two indulge in probing word games that explore the superficiality of spoken language and further frustrate the client leading him to question his own identity and finally to his destruction. The emphasis is on the difficulty in communication, and the difficulty that we have in expressing ourselves and the 'indefinable concepts' that construct our psyche through words: He finally leaves, questions unanswered and a terrible car-crash is heard. Evidently he didn't make it to the train.

Immediate comparisons were found between some of the central themes of *Le Préposé* and another 'narrative' of a considerably contrasting nature. This was a recording made in a park in China, where an older Chinese man teaches a younger Chinese girl one of the songs from the Chinese theatre. A particularly striking element of this 'narrative' was the fact that it involved no verbal language as we understand it, but still could clearly communicate the exact nature of what happened in the story: The teaching method itself was quite complex, but one could tell that the man was teaching the girl a simple song through the use of an extremely rhythmically and melodically elaborate melody. It was difficult not to compare this form of communication with that in the Tardieu play, both discourses involving aural encounters between two parties where one tries to attain or receive something from the other by adopting the tools of the discourse (words/music); the power relationships between the parties were also comparable - client/attendant, student/teacher. On the Chinese recording there were other uses of language and musical communication that were to affect the way the music was composed and structured within this composition, but simply the fact that the tape recording provided an entirely different method of communication through musical discourse, and that certain similarities existed between this 'narrative' and the thematic material of the Tardieu play in question was enough inspiration. Being left by force with a play that was considered essentially outdated and an equally outdated musical/theatrical form (opera), the adoption of the Chinese recording seemed the only recourse.

Other elements on the recording were also influential, particularly the attempt of a Westerner to imitate the sound of the Chinese language, which introduced some ideas about performing in a 'nonsense' language: Imitation of the songs, echoing the vocal characteristics of the Chinese language, but obviously with no significant potential other than realisation of a sound quality, was an interesting contrast with the Chinese girl trying to learn the song, both involving forms of communication that are not simply word-based. Another interesting element was some of the Chinese language spoken by the older Chinese man before he begins teaching the song, language with deliberate musical qualities characteristic of the Chinese theatre. The contradiction presented by the possibility of combining elements of Western

opera, an elite form for the selected few in Western society, with the 'Chinese Opera', which is an ancient system adopting simultaneously various different communicative systems so that there is something for everyone in the audience to appreciate (comparatively non-elite), was too exciting to ignore. This resulted in the creation of *Het Loket* (a Dutch translation of 'Le Préposé' ['the ticket-booth']), a music-theatre piece where two actors simultaneously perform the client and the attendant from the Tardieu play and the teacher and the student from the Chinese recording.

The question is, of course, how could the opera element be interpolated into an already complicated narrative structure. This was where the idea for an anti-opera became clearly manifest. On top of the two realities that already existed within the composition, the third discourse would be that of the opera singers and the musicians. The problems inherent in the operatic form could be demonstrated by having the opera singers play a role in attempting to define the already existing narratives through language forms: One of the singers adopting gestural signs, and the other vocal sounds, but gestures and vocal sounds with no semantic basis. The story of the student and the teacher is acted out central stage through musical interaction, and the opera singers interrupt the performance in order to 'explain' it to the audience, but because of the 'untranslatable' nature of their discourse they are unable to provide any basis for communication. This sets up an interesting ambiguity where the music speaks for itself despite all the efforts of the opera singers to confuse matters terribly. In any case, it can be seen that the third discourse of the opera singers is important in bringing out some of the the important themes from *Le Préposé* where the near impossibility of vocal communication is presented. This is also the intention of combining the discourses, whose collision provides ambiguities and points of confusion designed to make us question language as a central communicative form as it exists in Western theatre. The deliberate inclusion of a comic element into this composition is designed also to create a contrasting discourse that communicates through all the realities (especially the opera singers who appear the most absurd), allowing other elements to communicate subliminally.

SCENARIO

The four movement structure of *Het Loket* alludes both to structuring divisions in music and also the four act structure of theatre, although the four sections flow together forming an uninterrupted performance.

OVERTURE: The lighting rises from darkness and the five players positioned in a semi-circle around a central performing area are seen as almost caricatures of musicians: Instruments in position ready to play, faces with serious expressions but exquisitely motionless. Central stage is a large barrier (the teller) that sits in between two chairs. Next to each of the chairs is an absurd object: Tea pots with multi-coloured tubes emerging. After a certain time of waiting, the first musical sound bursts forward: The audience hears the sound of a violin and sees the violinist play with exaggerated performance gestures. After another time bracket accompanied by deathly motionlessness, the double bass is heard and the double bass gestures as if performing. The percussion player then moves to play the gong with an exaggerated gesture, but approximately when contact is made with the centre of the instrument, a loud and brash Asian instrument is heard (Peking opera gong). Then the double bass player moves to play and the sound of a clarinet emerges. The performance is rendered entirely ridiculous when the percussion player moves again to play the gong, but the plunking sound of a glockenspiel is heard. The instrumental sounds are being played on tape, and the live performers act merely to gesture as if they are performing. The imitations of the tape become more ridiculous, until finally the sound of a single gong on tape cues the performers to 'play' furiously, but without making a sound. While this is happening, the percussion player lifts his hand in slow motion as if to play the gong, and then suddenly and shockingly plays the first live sound, which brings about sudden motionlessness from the other performers. After a short time of absolute stillness, a real chaotic improvisation begins, with all the instruments playing together as loudly as possible. At this point the sound of a real opera overture which is on tape gradually emerges underneath the improvisation. When it becomes clear that another sound source has become manifest, the players begin to genuinely look around to find out where the sound is coming from, in between playing musical fragments. Soon however, these fragments stop, and we are left with the musicians performing simply movements of the head in a choreographed format without expression or intention. After the overture has died away, the opera singers emerge from backstage. The entrance of the opera singers is designed to present a negative image of the opulence of the opera, represented immediately by the costumes. The use of a real operatic overture which summons forth the singers is designed to posit the singers in their roles: Representatives of narrative who will structure the performance through text and bring about resolution. This is quickly rendered absurd.

INTRODUCTION: When the overture has faded out, the instrumentalists suddenly turn to the singers, clapping wildly. The violin player actually gets up and delivers an imaginary rose to the female opera singer who smells it and tosses it over her shoulder, smiling. The singers then go through a process of 'introducing' the instruments to the audience. The male singer stays at the front of the stage, and sings a short recitative in distinctly operatic style, but with a text consisting of only vowels. The female singer who had already walked over to the double bass player and 'introduced' him gesturally, now makes imitative sounds of the instrument accompanied by gestures as if she is playing. This brings the double-bass player to life, resulting in a short improvised imitation of the singer. It continues in the same form with the French horn and then the clarinet, presenting caricatures of the instruments: Their performance style, followed by their actual sound. However, when it comes to the violin, the

flow that has already been set up between the opera singers and the instruments is changed. The singer moves to the violin, and does the introductory gesture, but instead of imitating the sound, she picks an imaginary rose from the pocket of the violin player, and smells it. The violin, who is gesturing, ready to play, all of a sudden moves out of playing position and takes it back, appearing a little upset or angry. Apparently confused by the action of the violin, the female singer appears to have forgotten the last performer, and looks around to find out who that is. After another operatic recitative, the male opera singer gestures towards the percussion player, and realizing suddenly who she has forgotten, she rushes over towards him. This time there is an interaction between the percussion player and the singer, who tries to demonstrate the different percussion instruments. The Introduction is ended by the percussion player who plays loud notes on the Peking opera gong causing the opera singers to move to positions at the side of the stage.

EXPOSITION: The actors walk on stage. The actor representing the 'older man' comes on stage first: He enters stage left, and sits in a predetermined position centre stage on one side of the teller. The other actor representing the 'younger girl' enters timidly some seconds later. A short performance takes place through the teller, where the desperation of the client is represented. No vocal sounds are made, but the client attempts to communicate with the attendant who apparently is unable to acknowledge the other and mimes a number of clerical duties. The performers outside this reality stay totally silent and motionless until the percussion player plays a loud note on the Peking opera gong, cuing the actors to freeze and the opera singers to come back to life; the male singer performing a ridiculous imitation of Peking opera singing (with high falsetto and long sliding notes) using a nonsense vowel text, and the female performing distinct symbolic actions. Then the sound of a large gong from the percussion player cues the actors to start performing as if they are the Chinese teacher and student. The singers have stepped back to watch this performance. The actors pick up the strange objects sitting on the stage, which are revealed to be instruments. The actual music is played by the instrumentalists who are surrounding the central ensemble; their role is obviously essential to the development in this section. The music itself is influenced by the Chinese recording, and is characteristic of heterophonic music common in many forms of ancient music where a simple melody is elaborated into a totally new form. It begins with a complete recitation of the complex heterophonic melody, gestured by the 'teacher' (by blowing in the spout of the teapot), but played by the violin, and is answered by the 'student', but played by the clarinet. The student evidently can not play the melody and appears confused, so the teacher plays a short example, and when the student still can't make the connection, the teacher plays his melody a little simpler, and then a little simpler again. The student gradually is able to perform the melody slowly. Another raucous Chinese gong causes a sudden reversal of realities: The actors go back to performing the action of the *Le Préposé*, but this time a little slower and more stylised, while the nonsense Chinese text and gestures comes back into play with the opera singers. After a short recitation of the 'text', it returns again to the Chinese pantomime, and gradually the student learns the entire melody. Also other instruments start joining the performance, first a double bass drone and then long notes from the French horn. The whole scenario is gradually reaching a 'musical' point of resolution. The performance swings between the discourse of the Chinese performance and the opera singers/*Préposé* discourse a number of times still, but the fourth division begins with a very short Chinese-like nonsense text that leads again into the full ensemble, but this time with the falsetto male voice actually singing a simple melody with the nonsense texts. The gestures of the female have also become stylised into a strict but melodious pattern that repeats with the same rhythm as the other singer, and the actors are performing a series of stylised movements taken from the *Préposé* discourse. All performers are now playing

together, forming a harmonious whole reminiscent of the gamelan music of Indonesia and adopting Peking opera melodies. This apparent harmoniousness is soon interrupted by traffic sounds and car noises on tape (taken from the Tardieu play) which emerges from beneath and then overtakes the sound of the ensemble. In a reaction to the cacophony now presented by the car noises, the musicians one by one leave the performance space. First the violin player leaves, then the percussionist, then the clarinet player, and finally the double bass player. The singers however appear totally oblivious to the traffic sounds and go on performing the same melody and motions. Finally at the loudest point in the traffic noises, the 'client/student' runs suddenly offstage, and the sound of a horrific traffic accident is heard.

CONCLUSION: All the other performers have left, except for the attendant who is sitting behind his desk shifting through papers. The singers appear shocked by the car crash, and attempt to narrate the story of the death: The female singer sings a highly dramatic song of pain that results in her own death, and then the male singer, performing gestures of death in an effort to describe her 'song', also dies. The attendant finishes classifying his papers, totally oblivious to all that has gone on, and walks off stage. This is the end of the performance.

STAGING NOTES

Very few props are required by *Het Loket*. This is a deliberate attempt to 'strip' the theatre to a simple form where attention can be directed towards the performance and not distracted by unnecessary items that do not have a direct significative function. However, the presence of a 'teller' centre stage is important. This is intended to represent the type of teller commonly found in railway stations. A teller can be represented in a highly simple or stylised form, merely to imply that it is a barrier between two people where a window can be opened and communication can take place. The teller itself is symbolic of the distance that exists between people in the process of communicating, more specifically that barrier that cannot be overcome in order to discover true understanding: Language. The instrumentalists are set up in a semi-circle surrounding this property, which is where most of the 'dramatic' action takes place.

Other necessary items for the performance are in fact 'tools' of communication; the musical instruments used in the teacher/student discourse. The instruments used in the first performance were made from tea-pots with multi-coloured tubes emerging; the teacher had a larger instrument and the student a smaller. For a different performance, the instruments can be made more or less fantastic depending on the desires of the performers and producers.

This score is in fact designed to act as a guideline for the staging and there is room for a certain degree of interpretation in this regard.

NOTATION

The notation in *Het Loket* has been written in the clearest possible form, and is basically a combination of musical and theatrical 'events'. Mostly the score divides time into specified sections. The beginning of these sections is signified by a line or an arrow that begins at the Time Track (see illustration 1). The lines or arrows that make these time divisions will hereby be known as Time signifying Lines. Within these divisions occur the musical or performance 'events'. The beginning of a certain section brings about the performance of one or a number of events. If one event cues another musical/performance event to occur, the arrow or line emerges from the first event (see illustration 1).

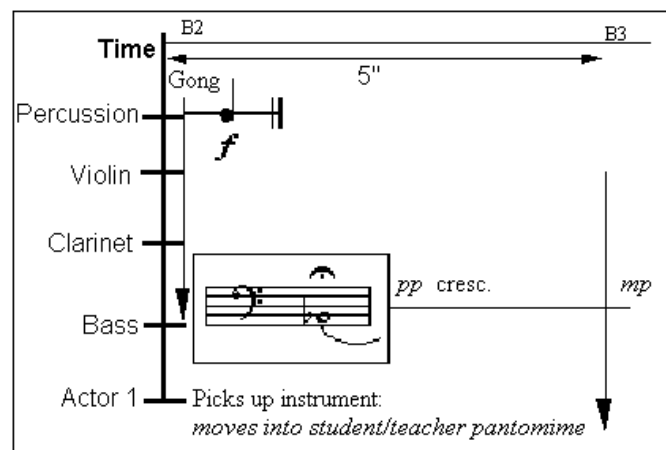


Illustration 1 – Time Track

The events themselves are constructed from simple instructions, illustrations and musical excerpts. Any action or sound is performed directly after the time specified by the signifying line, and is performed once or as many times as specified in the instruction. However, if an event is surrounded in a box or brackets with an arrow emerging, the event is repeated or continues to occur until the arrow reaches a time signifying line (or possibly another event), in which case the player stops and changes to the new event directly following the line (see illustration 2).

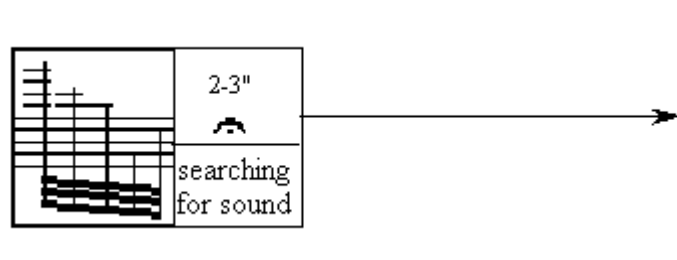


Illustration 2 – Event

The presence of a dotted line joining performance events during a time division signifies that a particular event is related to another event in some way: A line joining two events signifies that the second event occurs after the first. If the line is straight then the following event occurs directly after the first (similar function to one event cuing another event with the use of an arrow). However, if the line is on an angle, there is a short pause between the events (see illustration 3). Sometimes it is used simply to link performance events that are related in some way, such as performers interacting.

3 - Exposition

*Beat gong while actors are still bowing **Short percussive insertions during the pauses

Illustration 3

Large letters printed above the time track signify that the performers must move themselves in some way around the stage. The precise movements necessary are illustrated in a box above or below the score. The letters within the small circles stand for the performers (S1-singer 1, V-violin etc,) and the arrows signify the direction they must move.

A set of gestures represented by corresponding symbols are used by the singers and the actors during a performance. The intention of using the symbols for the female singer is to allow her freedom in interpreting her own movements from the diagrams and descriptions. It is important to note some factors in relation to the performance: When the gestures are repeated, they should appear recognisably the same. These gestures are also intended to be highly stylised, like an absurd mix of a strange sign-language and a dance form, where the actual meanings behind the signs can be recognised, but not directly connected with meanings because of the very fact that the singer is self-consciously performing them. In fact, during the first three 'interruptions the gestures can be broken down and rediscovered in a totally new way, almost unrelated to the original form. When the singers are performing with the musicians (3:D) the gestures have to be performed in a simpler form however because of the limited time in each of the bars. The gestures of the actors can be interpreted from the texts. These movements begin realistically at the beginning of the exposition and become gradually stylised as represented in the score itself.

Standard musical notation is also used at certain times during the work and can be treated as such; the music is played from beginning to end at the specified tempo.

TAPE

The tape part used in this composition is clearly illustrated in the score. It is used in the Overture and the Exposition, and three different types of sounds are used. The Overture begins with prerecorded instruments, preferably played by the same performers as used in the live performance. The instruments should be recorded with microphones near to the instruments and played loudly in performance so that the audience could initially think that the instruments are amplified. The second sound group used in the tape part is an excerpt from an orchestral opera overture. Any orchestral overture can be chosen, but preferably from Wagner. The third sound group, adopted at the end of the exposition is the sound of heavy traffic - speeding vehicles, horns blasting etc. This results in the sound of a horrific car accident which brings the exposition to a close.