

9702-FOM

TRANSCENDING THE BOUNDARIES : *The Festival of Musical Action* Vilnius, Lithuania (December 7-8, 1996)

3 - Exposition

Time

Singer 1
Performs symbolic gestures stylistically

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

Percussion
Peking Opera gong*
Flexatone
Auto horn
Glockenspiel
Ratchet
Whip

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

Singer 2
uu
o
a
i!

Percussion
Kettle drum
mf cresc.

*Beat gong while actors are still bowing

**Short percussive insertions during the pauses

Transcending the Boundaries
The Festival of Musical Action
Multimedial Music-Theatre in Lithuania

The 7th Festival of Musical Action, December 7-8 1996
Lithuania National Drama Theatre

—*Zachar Laskewicz, Australian composer of multimedial music-theatre, performed at this festival and has written this article on the remarkable cross-fertilization between different artistic genres.*

“The Festival of Musical Action” is a major event held annually in Vilnius, the capital city of the ex-Soviet state of Lithuania. It could certainly be suggested that the need for ground-breaking artistic events such as this is due to the massive changes that have been brought about by the new intellectual and artistic freedom now that they are separated from an oppressive Soviet regime. Whether or not this is true, it is certainly one of the most exciting events I have had the pleasure of witnessing in Europe. It was free from pretensions and western aesthetic ideals, attempting to extend the forms of communication binding music, theatre, and dance which can communicate with today’s audience in a dynamic but fragmented ‘musical’ language. From my experiences here both as composer and theoretician I feel that such a state of multimediality has still not been reached to the same degree in western Europe because of the strength of hundreds of years of European history which have resulted in the Europe of today. Philosophical, political and economic concepts have brought about a rigidified society of specialists and an elitist concept of musical communication. My work as a composer has from the very beginning been involved with an extended concept of musical communication. I must confess that my time at the “Festival of Musical Action” was indeed a dream come true.

I first heard about developments in contemporary Lithuanian music while attending a music-semiotics conference in Finland. A musicologist there described the changes brought about since their independence, and the search for a musical language which would express this new-found freedom. One of the students from a Lithuanian music academy heard my paper¹ on a multi-medial approach to musical experience and told me about the “Festival of Musical Action”, and the artistic director Tomas Ziburkus was soon in contact with me after I had returned to the Netherlands. It

¹ Laskewicz, Z. (1995) “Words Without Meaning or Meaning Without Words: towards a musical understanding of language”, *International Summer Congresses for Structural and Semiotic Studies, Music Semiotics Seminar*, June 10-16, Imatra, Finland.

took unfortunately two years before they were successful in getting me to perform there. I managed to find out a bit about the history of the festival from Ziburkus himself, who told me that they received no support from the government but from local and European sponsors who were interested in the event. Although not condoned by the traditional musical 'establishment', its popularity among young musicians and artists and the Lithuanian community in general had ensured its success.

Tomas Ziburkus wrote his thesis on contemporary music-theatre during his studies at the music academy in Vilnius. This thesis included the work of such figures as Mauricio Kagel who have challenged traditional approaches to 'musicality' and 'musical expression' by using media which don't belong to the categories propagated in western musical 'institutions' (both universities and conservatoria). Ziburkus told me that the intention of the festival was to explore all possibilities of 'musical expression', allowing many different types of experimental music-theatre and multi-media performance to take place. The ultimate purpose was to demonstrate that music has the possibility of being so much more than simply 'the sound it makes', but a way of experiencing reality, a form of artistic expression which goes beyond rational translation into verbal form but that can be expressed in many different 'non-musical' ways. This festival stands against the distinctions set-up and perpetuated in western culture, and is an event free from preconceptions about how music should be defined, resulting in an open atmosphere in which the existing artistic boundaries can be transcended.

The programme took place over a period of two evening concerts on a Saturday and a Sunday. The selection of performances was varied and presented 'multimedial' mini-concerts from France, Denmark, Australia, Russia, America and of course Lithuania. Carol Robinson, an American musician living in Paris, gave a performance of clarinet music combined with theatrical movement and lighting effects. The Danish performer Christer Irgens-Møller presented a programme for prepared voice, machinery and water called Water/Vand/Vatten/Eau/Aqua/Agua... involved with electronically adjusted vocal improvisation reacting to the amplified sound of water dripping from cups into buckets, combining natural and electronic sounds in an exciting fashion. Since 1989 Irgens-Møller has been a part of the group SKRÆP - an experimental music forum from Copenhagen. A music-theatre group from Austria presented a more staid form of music-theatre, embedded in the Austrian approach to dance and music. A highlight of their performance was Schafer's theatre work La Testa d'Ariane which

involved a bodiless head only able to react to musical sound, put on show for a carnival. It was wonderfully brought to life by the actor/singer Gunda Köning and was accompanied by the skills of the accordionist Alfred Melichar. The Austrian performance seemed quaint and almost stale in comparison to the dynamism of the Lithuanian performances. My own concert included two major solo performance works for performer, slides and tape based on Russian futurist experimental 'ZAUM' poetry², interspersed by a composition for masked flute performer and tape which explores the sound-based qualities of ancient Greek text, namely Songs of Incantation. There were many exciting Lithuanian compositions, which were by far the most diverse in the programme covering a large range of different types of performances, including among others combination of video, ritual-like theatre, jazz, stage objects and lighting effects. The work of the composer Antanas Jasenka with his composition Room Music was a particularly striking work, combining tape, voice, furniture and objects. Antanas said that his composition is a result of a realisation that the twentieth century has brought new ways of operating and relating to objects. Unavoidable was the presence of Russian artists, or Russian speaking Lithuanians, who presented some interesting collaborative projects.

There were many things that struck me about the festival, although the most striking of these would have to be the relationship between the audience and the performances. It didn't appear to be viewed as an avant-garde or 'fringe-event', and was held in a major theatre situated in the centre of the city and as such attracted an extremely large audience made up of many different types of people both young and old. The audience reacted and interacted with the performance in a dynamic way, which can be compared to the passivity of a standard audience in western Europe who have a bloated conception of the solitary and all-powerful figure of the 'composer'. For this festival, this whole notion has been rethought, and the composer is at once a dancer and a singer and a musician. Text is wrapped together with sounds and movements to create the whole complex multimediality of musical performance, and the audience itself becomes part of this totality. How wonderful it was to see an audience who were considered equally able to 'create' the performance for themselves, an idea which seems still absent in some western European 'contemporary music' circles which seem to consider that the (usually male) composer holds some kind of transcendental musical truth.

This is the first time I have really felt like I was involved in an event—be it not an

² 'ZAUM': Composition for live performer, slides and tape using 'meaningless' sound poetry from the Russian futurist poets Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh and Kamensky around which I have created a 'musical' sound/movement language.

officially sanctioned one—in which my work really fitted. Composers and musicians were given the chance to demonstrate that the shells provided for them by their culture are only constructions and that there are many other communicative possibilities open to them as creative artists. Anyone interested in taking part in this festival should contact me or Tomas Ziburkus, the artistic director of the festival, at the addresses below. I'm also interested in organising such a festival in Brussels, and anyone interested in taking part should send me information about their performance work. Although European music is still in many ways restricted by cultural and philosophical boundaries, events such as the “Festival of Musical Action” and new developments on the theatre-scene I regularly encounter in central Europe demonstrate to me that nothing remains static. The unavoidable forces of change will ensure that there will be an exciting future for multimedial musicality.

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