

FIRST PERFORMANCES

Eva Reiter, *The Rise*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2024.

‘Translation,’ wrote Susan Sontag, ‘is... first of all making better known what deserves to be better known.’

All musicians are, of course, translators. Classically: the composer translates an idea to the page; the performer translates the page into sound. But, of course, the moment you pull on this string you might as well be locked in a library of Ph.D. theses: what idea is the composer translating? Is it pitch? Is it form? Is it timbre? All of the above? And the performer doesn’t just translate into sound but also movement, and shape and light, and (in this opera at least) also touch, and (certainly on some occasions) smell and (even?) taste (!) and so on and so forth. And the performer doesn’t just translate into sound but also movement, and shape and light, and (in this opera at least) also touch, and (certainly on some occasions) smell and (even?) taste (!) and so on and so forth.

But the fact remains that someone is trying to make something better known.

I guess it helps with the translation if we gather with people who can listen ‘in parallel’ to us. By this, I don’t mean ‘at the same time’ but instead audiences in which we have some agreement of what we are all going to pay attention to in the music we experience. This is as true of death metal as it is of contemporary classical music. We do this by sharing histories (canons and anti-canons and so forth), communities and places – for example, the Centre Pompidou, with support from IRCAM, which is where and how this performance took place.

My memory now of Eva Reiter’s *The Rise* is that it began with movement. One might have read it as dance, at first, as it was not presented with surtitles. My memory of this particular movement is that it would be repeated a lot: sometimes in the hands of our narrator (the deaf actor Ruben Grandits) and sometimes in ornamented echoes in the bodies of the four professional dancers who joined the Ictus musicians. The feeling of unease – of unknowing – was heightened when the movements sometimes seemed to return with different translations entirely. Did these subtle movements that I

recognised as repeating really repeat? Or was I reading something that was not there? Or maybe they did repeat but were ornamented like a da capo aria, enhanced, expanded upon, changed entirely?

I couldn’t tell then and don’t know now, and I have to say: the feeling of being an outsider – of being an amateur again in the concert hall – was altogether astonishing, precious and refreshing.

It helped a great deal that it was entirely obvious that we were all of us together, amateurs and experts at once, in that hall. The dance I’ve mentioned stretched from the professional troupe through to the musicians (who moved a bit better or worse, but generally in time) to Ruben, who at some point joined the whole ensemble but could not fully join them in stepping in time to the music (this was highlighted by placing Ruben in front, where he could not quite follow his colleagues by sight).

These movements travelled back out in expertise, though: Ruben was (to my knowledge) the only fluent signer on stage. Here his movements took on the familiar, fluid quality of someone speaking their mother tongue. Signing had a powerful quality when performed by the professional dancers but was still clearly only an echo of semantic meaning – like someone who has really completed their Duolingo course but doesn’t yet have the shapes, sounds and rhythms of the language in their mouth.

By the time these movements made their way to the musicians, there was a charming childlike naïveté in the way certain movements were imitated. Of course, I have to point out that my reading here relies entirely on being unable to understand anything of the language itself. Might I have experienced it differently if Ruben’s movements carried their full semantic meaning to me? Would I have ‘understood’ the musicians the way the music teacher understands a roomful of joyful, cacophonous six-year-olds playing the recorder?

Some movements did retranslate into sound. The prelude was made entirely of scratchings and thumps and balls rolling across an amplified floor. Here, now, the musicians were again a range of experts. The singing was led by the (frankly wonderful) soprano Lore Binon,

resonated out through the strong voices of Ictus, and from time to time found its way into the amateur voices of the dancers. (A side note from this sound engineer to say the quality of the vocal sounds was frankly incredible considering it was all taken with headset mics. Warm applause for IRCAM's X.)

There were also spatialised electronics, though I have to admit I only really found these to be interesting when they truly called into question whether what we were hearing was being made live. This question of translation had a lot of promise early in the piece, but quickly waned. I found myself wondering if part of this might be the simple and familiar issue we all face in electronic music: the musicians on stage often do not hear the electronics – or hear only what they need to achieve certain demands of the piece. Maybe this could have been an interesting challenge: could there have been a critical part of the piece that the musicians and performers had no access to?

The music they did create on stage took place on a variety of instruments created especially by Reiter for this opera. They ranged from the amplified floors through a wide manner of tubes and trumpets to a wildly long, possibly single-stringed instrument (so long that I believe at least four people were playing on it at once) that was, for me, the highlight. It was quite interesting – and clearly a strong choice – that these instruments always and (so far as I could tell) only appeared in homogenous groups – all the musicians on stage playing the floor. The tubes played together (though amplified one by one, in a touching moment as Ruben took a microphone from player to player and gifted his audience a sound that he could not near himself). Then the trumpets. Then the string instrument.

A colleague once told me that all composer feedback boils down to the idea 'I would have done that differently'. And I think I've been thinking so much about this choice to group the instruments together so strictly because it is one I would just never even think to make. The sonic effect is interesting: it created a very clear, delineated form with seams of timbre at each moment of change. It also means that we don't really get *fusions* of sounds that transform and highlight new possibilities, but rather these more homogenous blocks.

But this restriction has a profound impact on the community: the resulting sound and semantic argument is perhaps less sculpted and varied, but it is always shared. *Everyone* is sometimes an expert and sometimes an amateur, but *everyone*

on stage is participating. What matters here is what can be shared, and said, by everyone.

Aaron Holloway-Nahum

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Lovely Music, Dundalk, Louth, Ireland, 14–15 June 2024.

Festival director Eamonn Quinn, at his Louth Festival of Contemporary Music based in the small, rural Irish town of Dundalk, gave us five concerts of 'Lovely Music' this year. The festival title, a characteristically mischievous sleight of hand, steals the important, and still active, Lovely Music record label name that Mimi Johnson, Robert Ashley's second wife, founded back in 1978 – so, I guess, it's Mimi's joke really. Ashley, who died ten years ago, was the centrepiece this year with two concerts – the complete final opera, *Crash*, on the opening night and 'The Bar', the fourth act of seven from *Perfect Lives* (1978–80). The festival is in its tenth year, a reason for celebration in itself. Its success, as I mentioned in these pages about last year's festival, is down to Quinn's personal interests and an acute ear not influenced by fashions or predatory agents and publicists. Some might think this a dangerous way to work but his audiences are loyal, attentive and enthusiastic. I'm not quite sure where they come from, though: sleepy Dundalk does seem a long way from anywhere, but it is heartening not to have the usual sea of grey-haired middle classes and bored folk swiping phones that seem to frequent the classical concerts and operas I've been to recently. It is quite courageous (and more than likely expensive) to bring the excellent Varispeed Collective of six voices from New York, the group who rehearsed *Crash* with Ashley just before his death, as well as the six voices of Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart for a rare performance of Stockhausen's *Stimmung* in the final concert.

Before attending I realised I had all sorts of misremembered and hazy ideas about Ashley mingling with other end of the century obsessions: hip and probably ephemeral things like David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*, for example, which seems to me to have more than a passing resemblance to Ashley's soap-like trailer-park characters and their daily lives. I turned for help to Kyle Gann's excellent book. On the second page he enthuses, 'it is a thesis of this book that Ashley is not only an opera composer but the greatest opera composer of the last