

Vortrag für Kongress Barcelona

Citizens' Opera: Participation projects between social approach and artistic relevance

Welcome to the last contribution of the series of lectures for today with the title: "Citizens' Opera: Participation projects between social approach and artistic relevance."

We have heard quite a lot about the topic "libretto" and research in this field today. Now, at the end of all these lectures, before we open the Forum, I would like to speak to you about my experiences with a particular genre, which – according to what I have observed – is gaining ground in German speaking and the Benelux countries. But, of course, the kind of project I want to give a lecture on is possible in any language and adaptable for a whole variety of art forms.

I'm talking about participation projects. These are projects that 'integrate' non- professionals – such as young and old people, migrants, persons with difficult social backgrounds as well as ordinary citizens and people with disabilities – in the conception, the development and/or the realization of an artistic project, supervised by professionals.

Participation projects range from music and spoken theatre, dance, visual arts and all kinds of hybrid and experimental forms. In recent years these projects in German speaking countries have frequently been made in collaboration with, or were initiated by, institutions like theatres or festivals. Initially they emerged out of a social context with cultural integration as a goal. Music – a universal language – for example, is a perfect medium for participation projects.

In what way do such projects, apart from the aspect of social integration, also pursue artistic relevance, have to pursue artistic relevance? Is the journey to the end product already the goal, or do veritable artistic works occur? I would like to present an example to you and put these questions up for discussion. On the other hand I'd like to know more about your experiences with such projects here in Spain or other countries.

Some projects during my work for the European Capital of Culture 2010 in Essen were conceived as participation projects and were especially designed for young people. In the context of one project about the composer Hans Werner Henze there were, for example, composition workshops that challenged the discovery and communication of one's own creativity. Another project included young people in the performance of a new opera by Hans Werner Henze, who was one of

the first composers to encourage music education in the late 1960s, for example in Montepulciano.

But the project that I would like to present to you in detail was created quite recently – performed on the 10th June – in the State Theatre of Wiesbaden and was of a completely different dimension. I'm talking about "Gilgamesch", a Citizens' Opera. What does this mean: "Citizens' opera"? The goal was a piece of music theatre in an urban context, created by citizens for professionals.

First of all, a quick sketch of Wiesbaden for those who don't know it: Wiesbaden is a city close to Frankfurt and is the regional capital of Hesse with 275.000 inhabitants. Wiesbaden was a famous health resort with mineral water springs.

The State Theatre in Wiesbaden includes opera, spoken theatre, ballet, concerts and a very active Youth Theatre Section. The theatre's education department had the idea of creating a "Citizens' Opera" in the year 2009. Financially it was supported by different funds and by the city council.

The theatre's education department publicised the project around the whole town and finally there were over 100 people who wanted to be involved with this opera: Young and old people, groups, classes from schools and individuals, Germans and foreigners, handicapped and non-handicapped people with completely different social and also cultural backgrounds: in fact it was a complete cross section of the citizenship of Wiesbaden.

The project grew over two years. The goal was a musical work, a reflection on the urban community, done as a collaboration supervised by professionals from the theatre. The opus was planned to be performed on the big stage in the State Theatre, with soloists from the ensemble, the chorus and the orchestra. Non- professionals also had to appear on stage. At the beginning, nobody knew if there would be enough material for a ten minute work or a full length opera.

The subject for the libretto was determined by the project's directing team. The team selected the epic of Gilgamesch, which is the first written epic in human history and came down to us inscribed on clay tablets. The epic tells the story of the Sumerian monarch Gilgamesch who rules the town of Uruk, 5000 years ago. Gilgamesch is an admired hero but also a cruel, egoistic tyrant. All of a sudden there is Enkidu, a wild fighter, who comes out of the wilderness. Gilgamesch and Enkidu become friends and fight together side by side.

When the goddess Ishtar desires Gilgamesch as her husband he refuses, and even kills her heavenly bull. In revenge the gods send a disease to Enkidu who dies. For the first time in his life Gilgamesch

grieves for someone. He doesn't want to end like this and travels to the nether world or Orcus to look for Utnapishti, its guard. He asks him for immortality. But Utnapishti doesn't give him immortality, he just gives him advice: He should go back to his hometown, Uruk. Together with the citizens of Uruk Gilgamesch should design and create a habitable town that will last forever. This will make him immortal.

This story of Gilgamesch is the ideal pattern for the examination of an urban context – in Uruk 5000 years ago or today in a town like Wiesbaden. So, indeed, lots of parallels with everyday life today arose out of the story of Gilgamesch. Some visions about what could be a habitable town were integrated in the libretto, written by 70 participants in the project. Some of those visions – to give you an impression – were better social security, work for everybody, renovation of buildings and gardens, remedying loneliness - especially of old people - and, also, more chocolate!

The libretto was developed during a three-month-workshop, together with dramaturgues and the opera's directors. The libretto divided the parts of the epic,

which came down to us in different versions on twelve clay tablets (in German "Tafeln"). These texts about the story of Gilgamesch were mixed with wishes for a modern town. The libretto was the basis for a big variety of musical interpretations. Fifty composers developed a score supervised by two professional composers. The score includes a Rap-Song, two Rock songs, but also real Arias and amazing instrumental parts.

When I read the score and saw the rehearsals the most interesting thing to me was that – in spite of all these different influences through this number of "artists" – there was a big curve, an entity, through the diversity of the libretto and the music. The different musical genres are set with dramatic intent, not as a simple juxtaposition. Somehow a real com-position had grown. The music is part of the narrativity.

In many discussions with the professionals and the non-professionals it turned out that, during the development of the piece, within the groups there was a growing sensibility for style and aesthetics. The group – not the professional supervisors – became the corrective for the work. The focus was not the individual achievement but the overall result.

The real result is an amazing score of 181 pages and a work of about 100 minutes. The opera was recently created with 4 soloists, chorus, orchestra and about 100 non-professional people performing as a silent chorus.

To give you a visual impression, I have brought a "Making-of-Gilgamesch" on DVD. It is a film of about 3 minutes. In the background you can hear one of the arias of Enkidu in a rudimentary form, with

piano, during a rehearsal. Unfortunately I didn't manage to get a recording of the creation:

DVD: The Making of "Gilgamesch" ca. 2'45

You can see in the film that this was very dedicated and emotional work, concerning the libretto, the music, the conception, the rehearsals and the performance. The poetry of the libretto and the music lies in the freshness and honesty of the authors. And of course the journey, the enthusiasm of the non-professionals and professionals finding a new way to express themselves, was one of the principal goals. In this enthusiasm and the richness of the participants lies the most sustainable effect of the project.

But I think this is more than a simple social project. The piece and the performance itself – not only the model as a participation project – had a certain quality. And this is what such projects should seek for. Participation projects are not only a try-out for everybody who feels free to do something, but the goal has to be works of a certain significance and relevance. They should be planned and treated not only with enthusiasm but with seriousness. I think they offer huge potential and stimulation... also, and especially, for professionals.