

Tina Hartmann

3 x 3 = ∞ Pronouncing the unspeakable - an approach to documentary opera

In 2004 the young Composer Karola Obermüller and I accidentally got seated next to each other on a train to Salzburg. She working a score on her Mac, me reading a book on the baroque Hamburg Gänsemarkt opera, we soon found out that we were composer and librettist and decided, logically, to produce an opera.

The idea was to chose a very formal approach: three times three performers multiplying to an infinite number of dramatis personae and work out a story that uses techniques of sound location, (ambisonics, iosono or, as it finally worked out, ZKMs Zirkonium), as a crucial part of narration.

Even with this strong technical approach to the score, we were determined to tell a real story, even a political story, to use characters, and give them emotions and development.

Coming freshly from Zeheleins Forum Neues Musiktheater Stuttgart in the days when everybody around us was using textual fragments or Greek mythology, when characters seemed to be good only for disintegration, it felt as though we were alone, reactionaries fallen out of time. Used to that feeling I still kind of rub my eyes, as suddenly in 2011 all over the place narrative operas premiere by composers and librettists that only a few years ago would not even think of doing this: JUST TELL A STORY.

The project 3x3 is still more of a narrative, experimental setting than a finished opera, and I would like to focus on the relationship of individual memory and (something I seemingly have to stress) objective documents. This leads to the question: How and why to do documentary opera?

3x3's story and setting are pretty simple: A Woman called A - she might be a journalist, human rights activist or historian - gets involved with a picture that shows three missing people, two men and a woman. She starts to research, as voices from the material start to question her. The harder she inquires, the stronger the voices get. They even accuse her, and they have good arguments, all derived from original documents of pogroms from different places and times of the 21st century. In an inversion that can be observed almost everywhere, the perpetrators try to make themselves appear as victims (of politics, circumstances, etc.) and place the victims in an aggressive or even attacking position. So the offender transforms himself into a victim, and transforms the victim into the offender.

A tries to defend herself at first, saying: I am just a spectator. But as the story progresses she recognizes she has discovered her own past. The woman from the picture is her sister with her husband, and the second man is A's first teenage love. They were killed in a massacre when their former friends turned into murderers. A survived. As she developed the specific survivor's feeling of guilt and shame she had lost her memory. Or, as an alternative and more fantastic interpretation: The victims take over her memory. Or she discovered her mother's story. That's open to interpretation. *Just as the very act of remembering is an act of interpretation.* I will come back to this point a little later.

The opera ends with what we called the 'song of consciousness' by A and her dead family, trying to include them, include the past and find a way to live on.

Documentary opera

Documentary opera seems to be contradictory in itself, or at least not the first choice. Spoken theatre meanwhile has a long tradition of attempts at documentary, using written documents and/or, like, Rimini Protokoll, even living witnesses telling their own stories. Spoken theatre can easily handle rather large amounts of texts. Method-wise it can simply re-transfer them back into the witnesses' or victims' *spoken word*. But, due to its musical time structure, opera has to select fewer words. So, on one hand there's a pressure to reduce documents to little fragments which at the same time leads to the danger of destroying their status as documents. That's the very problem we are still stuck with, with 3x3. In addition, music, meaning the sung word, always leads to an artificial transformation, which in itself is generally contradictory to the idea of a document.

So far so bad for our choice of genre!

Dreimaldrei gleich unendlich (3x3=∞)

3x3 was researched at, and supported by, the Hamburg Institute for Sozialforschung (HIS), well known ever since they produced the first and second exhibition *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht* in the late 1990s and were the first to raise the issue of how the German Army actively participated in the pogroms of the 1940s. Nowadays this position is widely accepted.

Their historians specializing in survivors and memory made us sensitive to the fact that, generally, there is no such thing as an objective document. Every document is an interpretation, be it a

text or even a photograph or film document. The HIS preserves a set of colour photographs, pictures of clothes and belongings people had to strip off before they were shot. These pictures look like a beautiful installation, but they are definitely not. As far as we know their aesthetic quality derives purely from the *frame* the photographer took.

As we know not only from the spectacular trials of several Concentration camp warders, even victims sometimes falsely remember. Offenders do so, logically, as the very act of recollection is only possible by 'making sense' out of the past. And what is most important: the present always provides the criteria for interpreting one's own past. That alone will substantially change the perpetrator's recollection as soon as he or she lives in a different social surrounding, e. g. one that does not ask you to shoot your friends because they are Albanian, Jewish or Tutsi.

So, even while we know that recollection, documents and even the best research by the best historians never reaches the *truth*, given that there is only interpretation, nevertheless recollection - that is, narration in the sense of the very act of story-telling -, becomes a strategy of personal and social survival, of integrating the past into the present, be it one's own, that of one's family, nation, creed, or whatever.

With this in mind: suddenly documentary opera seems to be the best choice of genre. After all, it will never occur to anybody to take it as objective truth. (Which will therefore, maybe, save the piece from becoming Agit Prop, in the sense of a truth too simple to be true?) On the contrary it stresses the aesthetical settings and with it the act of interpretation, of making sense.

Using documents in 3x3

We decided to use three types of documents: Texts, pictures, video, and insert them into a narration that is documentary in so far as it uses typical means of traumatised behaviour. To give the spoken documents a strong virtual reality, we filmed two actors in HD, trying to strip them from any historical background. So even as these words come directly from documents from different ages, they are timeless. They belong to the past, the present and, I fear, to the future also.

Amongst the huge amount of documents from World War II we found at the Institute a set of private movies from the 1940s, that for some reason attracted us the most. They are pretty jolly and almost Arcadian films from normal life during wartime; there were even films from a battalion in Poland that looked like big boys on a holiday tour. It occurred to us that they could serve both as a contrast, and as an historical foundation for A's recollection, and that they could insert the vulnerability of life itself into our narrative. Again, just by cutting them into the piece without further commentary, meaning began to shift. So we had a whole experimental setting of combinations, following the question of when and how we perceive an individual on stage or whom we, as spectators, believe most:

Pure voice; voice and video still; voice and video document; actor in HD video; actor on stage; singing voice: mute singer; singer; singer and documents, etc.

Now I would like to show you some parts from the video recording of the project's first staging by Hendrik Müller at Academy Schloss Solitude in 2009. Videos are by the Portuguese video artist José Carlos Teixeira.

The structure of our experimental setting started with sung and spoken text and music. Then we had a large part just with spoken and filmed documents, which I'll skip now because it is without music and still under construction. Spoken text runs throughout the opera as an essential means of articulation, because, as Karola put it: "there are things you cannot express with singing".

I would like to show you the part when the documents emerge and call for A; the situation, when A finds the above mentioned photograph.

First video, 11:00-14:07

The second section starts after the documentary part and takes it over into the narration. There are two main stories which I'll briefly summarise for all of you who do not understand German: First the story about a little Girl who survives the massacre because her mother or sister convinces the murderers that the child is in fact not her Jewish child, but a German stepchild she took care of.

The second is the story of two sisters, both married to men of the wrong side/tribe. They are caught with them, and are offered the opportunity either to die or to leave. One decides to die, the other goes away as her husband begs her to.

This is the borderline, when the documents start to penetrate A's life in terms of making her fall (back) into the narration of memory. A identifies herself with the sister who survived, and develops the feeling of guilt that is typical for survivors of massacres, but also of catastrophes or epidemics, at least in the western hemisphere.

Second Video, 33:00-41:32