

## Händl Klaus

### "Bluthaus", "Buch Asche" and "Wüstenbuch", and the formal differences in the writing of libretti

Thank you. Good morning. I started as a writer of plays, of spoken plays, and before that of prose, but since childhood music was the dearest medium to me. I was taken by music. And I thought of writing libretti one day, but it took me some years to get there. And the first question, since this is a symposium about libretti is, why does a text have to be sung? Why does it need music? Why isn't it enough to have it played by actors and spoken? For me there are certain subjects that cry out, really, for music. They are subjects that cannot be told, - though "telling" is not the exact word for that -, that cannot be transmitted or transported without this phenomenon that we call music, this translation into sounds that reach us, and correspond with us [*placing hand on heart*], even though we don't understand the narration or a certain "logic". Whenever we hear music, it, the music, talks in its very own voice, and we have a hard time even finding words for the experience we go through with the particular music we are hearing, - if it's music that touches us, if it's music that has something to do with us; that's another phenomenon that I cannot explain. But of course there's music that leaves me behind, and other music that I feel invites me in, that questions me, that challenges and even "confronts" me.

So I've got subjects, - in German the word is "*Stoffe*" which originally means cloth, substance or food. Stoffe, things that keep haunting me, sort of electric "loads" that come to my mind and heart, that enter my eyes in this world, that I know need music, others that need

to be just poetry, lyric, and others that remain prose; and others that are for the theatre, spoken word drama. And as to those that need music they need a certain music, and this is the case because, as you all know (!), music speaks, tells us about the composer, so it's really the composer's vision and the composer's field of suspense, the composer's temperature. It's hard for me to find words here, but it's what makes us, what makes us individuals, makes us think and feel, in this certain way that each one of us has in his own, or her own, way. So. I've got certain composers whose work I love. From a long time ago. And those are people whose work I live with. Whose works I listen to because it's something that helps me to stay alive; and to deal with this being here, in this world. The whole matter of being to me is sort of a question field, a question. Because I don't have any religious system that could help me. So I've got nothing except what we are confronted with here, and music goes beyond, far beyond that. So maybe that's why I'm so hungry for composers who share this, or who have their very own voice.

Now, this special music, by special composers, this individual music, is here for special subjects, for special "Stoffe". And vice versa. I mean there are Stoffe, subjects, that you could do for one composer, but never for another. And that's..., really, I feel like a groom, or like a bride, you know, doing that, and the best example was, I had... I mean I have to be personal here, I'm sorry, it's not meant to be privatistic, but it's just my experience. I heard *Nacht*, the first chamber opera by Georg Friedrich Haas sixteen years ago, and I was struck by it, felt like, wow, what's happening here? And I got the cd, after I had heard it on the radio, and I kept listening to it, and three weeks after that, a subject came to my mind that I thought would be the one for Georg Friedrich Haas. But who am I to approach him, of course? Then Georges [Delnon] invited me two years ago to meet him; so fourteen years after that we were brought together, and

luckily Georg Friedrich Haas felt similarly when I presented the subject to him. He was struck by it, in a way. So I think that this was something that had happened long, long ago, and was really installed by his music, when I heard *Nacht*. I mean, it's not a response to *Nacht*, it's a totally different subject, but the temperature of his music is the thing that sort of set this fire. [*Laughing*] I hope that you can understand what I'm trying to say! You see, I need music; that's why I want to write for composers! [*audience laughter*]. But each one of those Stoffe, those subjects needs its certain individual form of writing. So you have very different kinds of poetry for different subjects. There are icy harsh subjects and feverish ones, and some that can hardly be heard, and they each yearn for their own way of expression. Now, and this happened, they all need to be brought into another "state of aggregate" which is what music does. I am hungry for that change.

So if you think of water that turns into ice, or ice that turns into water, or water vapour, you have this with words through music. That's my idea, words become part of the music in the end, they are music – which sometimes means that you are no longer able to really hear the meaning of the words; but in some way you can feel something that has got to do with it, which speaks for it in a much more precise voice, or in a much more... Wow, this is really hard, [*audience laughter*]. Really. If things are not to be said, it's really hard! I think the things that one wants to express with words, I wander around those things by saying those words, but I can almost never, never really reach within. It's like when you're lovers and you look into each others' eyes, you have that. I'm so romantic right now. So... [*laughter*]. But of course it's about death. Above all it's about death. That's why - I think - I really fell for opera, or music theatre because, what we have with opera is that we hear death happen, happening. Because it's always the human voice, exhaling, that is

being made audible, and exhaling is dying of course, so it's a process of constant dying, to hear opera. And to me that's why my subjects deal with death, the subjects for opera or for music. So it's really an organic thing and a romantic thing. [*Laughing*] So excuse me for that. But the composers that I love, well, they feel, I think, similarly, about death. And of course we can think of death as part of another process. So, now we should talk about these composers; and I would like to present the works which I did for them, and with them.

Let me show you this first Wüstenbuch example:

weil ich, seit die Sonne, als der Wind, der immer weht, gedreht hat,  
daß der Sand zur Seite fiel, windstill, aufgegangen ist, daß der Tag  
anbrach und bricht, im Licht dich wie du mich und wieder sehe,  
sehe ich, während, wie, wie ich sehe, immer deine Stirn, die  
Augen, Mund, das Haar, der Hals und deine Schultern, Brust und  
Arme, deine Hände atmen, wie die Hände, Brust und Arme, deine  
Schultern und der Hals, Haar und Mund, die Augen, deine Stirn  
noch atmen, daß du, während, Schweiß auf allem, Stirn und  
Augen, Mund und Haar, Hals, die Schultern, Arme, Brust und  
Hände atmen, in der nächsten Stunde gehst, wie ich sehe, seit der  
Wind, der immer weht, gedreht hat, daß der Sand zur Seite fiel,  
windstill

(because, since the sun, when the wind that always whistles turned so  
that the sand fell sideways, windless, rose so that the day dawned and  
broke, I see you as you do me and again, I see, while, the way, the way I  
see, always your forehead, eyes, mouth, hair, neck and your shoulders,  
chest and arms, your hands breathe, the way hands, chest and arms, your  
shoulders and neck, hair and mouth, eyes, your forehead still breathe so  
that, while, sweat everywhere, forehead and eyes, mouth and hair, neck,  
shoulders, arms, chest and hands breathe, you will leave in the hour to  
come, as I see, since the wind that always whistles turned so that the sand  
fell sideways, windless / translated by Catherine Schelbert)

So, this is simply poetry, one could say, and it's quite conventional.  
It's one single long phrase that's been rhythmicised. It was written  
for Beat Furrer, in order to be changed into music, to become part of  
his music. In no way and by no means would I like to have my text  
illustrated, that's something that I would really run away from. Again,

I'm hungry to see what happens to the words, and I'm happy if the words work as a catalyst to evoke music, and in the end maybe you don't find a single word that you can hear. Well, in the beginning of this, you can. There's a male voice speaking, its essence would be, in English: "I can see that you're going to die very soon". This voice, combined with the sand and with the wind that work with each other [*gestures movement flowing from one hand to the other*] just creates this comparison. Now, let's hear it.

[*music sample*]

The words could be understood rather clearly there. Yet Furrer is famous for the no-longer-audible sense of the words, and the process of abstracting that takes place in the following section would show that. By the way, I always wonder why abstraction gives some of us such a hard time. I mean, to me abstraction is, at the same time, organic - because I am here with my feelings, no, with my awareness, my sensitivity -, and at the same moment that I am confronted with something abstract, a system of signs or an illogical pattern, I inevitably transform it, into something personal; and that so-called abstract work of art talks to me and touches me deeply. If the work is strong enough, if it's personal, if it has something to say.

As to abstraction, we also have that with a libretto for Klaus Lang, which is called Buch Asche, Book Ashes. The origin was a very old, cruel Chinese fairy tale about a farmer who vividly dreams of strewing ashes on the Emperor and being beheaded for it. When she really follows her nightmare and transforms it into reality, - in spite of her husband's fear and desperation, in the midst of winter, having burnt the only book she owned (her own family book) together with the rice straw they slept on in order to obtain the ashes, sitting in a tree she does indeed throw them at the Emperor - these ashes

change into cherry blossoms, which the Emperor very much appreciates. The woman receives a gift from him, a white silk robe, and she slowly walks home where she will mourn for his victims and be threatened by her husband. White of course is the Asian colour for sadness, and there are many more symbols in that old tale.

As you said, Georges [Delnon], it's sometimes images that you start with as a composer. There's a whole system of symbols that we have used here, such as silk, bone, paper, ash, rice, ice, cherry blossom, blood, water, wind... Klaus Lang asked a Chinese friend to transform a selection of them into Chinese letters – thus he got thirteen signs, Chinese ideograms which he assigned to each of the opera's thirteen parts, and he even transformed these Chinese signs into notes. So what you hear is thirteen audible Chinese signs, - I'm really reducing this in a horrible manner, it's much more complicated in reality, but I have to keep it short. Confronted by those pointillistic ideograms, Klaus Lang composed the music first. So he had written the notes long before I started writing – meaning that he gave me the hardest time of my life because there I was, struggling with a predetermined number of bars of music that were presented to me to work with; above all using their exact number of syllables, and at the same time having to tell the story, giving life to the characters as well as establishing a system of associations. Also, I wanted the text to correspond to what Klaus Lang did in his music; in a way it meant destroying the language, like complete deconstruction – but thus getting to the roots where first you find pure sound and after a while the sense enters, and only then its meaning, the possible meaning.

## BILD 1

### BAUERN:

wie : der wie : der wind : im reis : feld legt : er : schöpft : zu schlaf : en sich : zu t :  
räumen : auch : am feld : rand : dürr : e : jun : vom reis : den m : an : n und : wie :  
er gräbt : im haus : vor : aug : en : xi : ruft : sie den : sie : allein : in ruhe : kennt :  
er ihr : en : raum : sie : teil : en ihn : nun auf : gewühlt : durch : sucht : am bett :  
wo er : die alte : matt : e : hebt und : in der : weichen : er : de : gräbt : er sei : dig :  
weiß : es : aus : dem langen : speich : el : fad : en : aus : ge : koch : t : er raupen :  
aus : ge : hob : en hat er : das ver : steckte sei : den : kleid : leicht : wie sie : jun :  
ge : r : üben zieht : er : trägt : es : heim : lich f : ort : sie sieht : ihn : z : war : n :  
ich : t : sein : ge : sicht : doch der : rücken : täuscht : sie nicht : ver : setzt was :  
sie im t : raum be : sitzt :

This was the beginning – a chorus of farmers who describe how the woman, Jun, has an earlier dream that shows her husband stealing her white silk robe which really, being poor and almost starving, she doesn't possess.

My writing process felt like solving a crossword puzzle by inventing it. The next example is a duet; again I had to stick to the number of syllables given by my composer – always counting the vowels. The first line had to have ten syllables, the second – replying- was a line of five syllables, the third of ten, the fourth twenty, the fifth of nine, the sixth of thirteen, seventh of five and eighth of seven syllables:

## BILD 5

JUN m : ich : hat der to : d ge : t : räum : t : e : ich : das feld :  
XI vor un : s : liegt eis : ig :  
JUN soll da : s : r : ei : s : ig : auch v : er : brenn : en : las : s : en :  
XI muß : ich d : ich ent : f : ach : t am t : od : er : von be : täubte : n : wur : zel :  
n : blut : en : d : we : ich v : er : kroch : en :  
JUN fl : am : me : n : b : lind : in un : s : er : tote : n : buch :

XI        vers : eng : e : n : fremd : z : er : fall : e : n ze : chen : w : arm zu : asch : e : n :  
 JUN        jun er : kannte : m : ich :  
 XI        v : erb : rann : te mit : d : em n : am : en :

You can see that the words have been broken into their smallest parts, into their cells, even smaller than syllables, morphemes, sometimes single letters; and that's so because it changes the sense and meaning of the cells. Words consist of "cells", and I wanted to create clouds of associations that would oscillate, words that would start oscillating with each other, so that you could follow at least those words or even parts of phrases if not whole phrases. At the same time you can read them backwards as well as forwards, like dominos. Do you know that game? If you're talking about it as a game it would be domino. By using that method you evoke different meanings, one particular sense and another as well, sometimes even three or four at a time. As here they all correspond with each other, a verb can be connected with any of the following subjects, and vice versa; there's a whole bunch of meanings in a single phrase. Sometimes the first word corresponds with the very last, and in between you have other things happening, that are really narrative. Given this pointillistic "Stoff" it was the only way to write; it would not have worked with either Wüstenbuch or Bluthaus.

Bluthaus is my last example. A young woman wants to sell the family house after her parents' death. Here we have ghost music – fragments of what used to be the parents' language. They cannot be understood any longer for death has taken most of their voice and words; it's the remains probably echoing in their daughter's memory:

VOICE WERNER           nü – go – o – i – i – ho  
VOICE NATASCHA       a – lü – me – no – e  
VOICE WERNER           ra – r – re – na – ü  
VOICE NATASCHA       ü – mü – ni – i – e  
VOICE WERNER           aj – lö – rü  
VOICE NATASCHA       we – ma – n – n  
VOICE WERNER           n – ma – n – n  
VOICE NATASCHA       wü – ö – aa

Later they will reappear. But first their daughter Nadja welcomes  
Axel, a broker:

AXEL                    Frau Albrecht,  
NADJA                 bitte,  
AXEL                    Freund,  
NADJA                 Herr Freund. Das ist mein Haus. Nadja.  
AXEL                    Schön. Ich schaue, wenn ich darf, mich um,  
NADJA                 Sie sehen es,  
AXEL                    mir an.  
NADJA                 Es ist eng,  
AXEL                    in Ihren Augen,  
NADJA                 sehen Sie,  
AXEL                    es täuscht,  
NADJA                 Sie,  
AXEL                    sind darin,  
NADJA                 aufgewachsen,  
AXEL                    da,  
NADJA                 her ist es,  
AXEL                    Ihnen nah.  
NADJA                 Nach drei Schritten steht man,  
AXEL                    an,  
NADJA                 der Wand.

Axel shows the house to the different people who might be interested in buying it. They stroll around, finding it beautiful with its fruit garden, and they vividly imagine their future living there – until the neighbours appear, telling everyone that the whole place is sticky with blood, after the mother killed her husband and herself because of his abusing their daughter since childhood.

BUBEN MALETA	Das Blut kam,
HERR MALETA	hell,
FRAU BEIKIRCH	hervor,
HERR FUCHS	geschossen.
FRAU SCHWARZER	Sie muß außer sich,
HERR SCHWARZER	gewesen sein.
FRAU STACHL	Da liegt es noch.
FRAU SCHWARZER	Wir haben es bloß,
HERR SCHWARZER	ausgesprochen.
HERR MALETA	Dieses Haus ist voller Blut.
NADJA	Alle Spuren sind entfernt. Die Polizei hat mir geholfen.
HERR DR.STRICKNER	Es ist spürbar,
HUBACHER	hier,
HERR FUCHS	geblieben,
FRAU BEIKIRCH	als Geruch,
BUBEN MALETA	der uns verstört.

The house makes Nadja suffer which is why she needs to get rid of it, to get away. But she won't succeed – the clients flee, she remains alone. And so she decides to starve herself to death inside the house.

AXEL	Darf ich,
NADJA	mir,
AXEL	die Hände,
NADJA	waschen,
AXEL	da wir doch,

NADJA	kein Wasser,
AXEL	haben,
NADJA	und die Seife,
AXEL	auch,
NADJA	versteckt ist,
AXEL	geht es nicht.
NADJA	Sie bleiben,
AXEL	schmutzig.
NADJA	Gute Nacht.
AXEL	Verzeihen Sie.
NADJA	Mein Freund,
AXEL	ich breche auf.
NADJA	Sie haben noch den Schlüssel,
AXEL	und Sie schließen,
NADJA	hinter sich. Schaffen Sie es,
AXEL	fast. Die schwere Tür,
NADJA	schließen Sie ab.

Language appears as a “fatalistic force” taking hold of Nadja, pushing her towards the inevitable – helped by her visitors and her ghostly parents. The visitors form a phalanx – accusing her of offering them a malignant place, and her parents remain present, suffocating her. Together, they all sort of form a monster – by talking, by sharing the phrases; one starts and the other continues, thus constructing Nadja’s prison whereas Nadja and broker Axel at one point – after the clients leave – form a desperate couple using the same technique to express – or construct – an effort at love-making which will all too soon be disrupted by her father. Georg Friedrich Haas decided to combine singers with actors; the clients who are not as deeply involved would stick to speaking, whereas Nadja’s family and the broker needed the most emotional expression we can think of – they have to sing. Let’s finish by listening to some of it. Thank you.