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A documentary radio play as a positive concert experience of contemporary music

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Bulgarian-Luxembourg composer Albena Vrachanska Petrovic's radio opera 'The Blue Piano' to a libretto by Matthias Theodor Vogt premiered on May 3, 2023 at the Bulgarian National Radio in Sofia. Julian Teuremer reports.

In the radio opera 'The Blue Piano', Else Lasker-Schüler's poem of the same name is set at the end of a timeline that begins with the start of World War I and continues through the end of World War II. It thus encompasses the period of the most devastating impact of the two most effective ideologies of the 20th century, Communism and National Socialism. Two historically documented concert pianists had to live through this period in an exemplary manner - Vera Lautard-Shevchenko from Paris in the Siberian archipelago Gulag, Alice Herz Sommer from Prague in the concentration camps Theresienstadt and Buchenwald. Both survived and lived to a ripe old age. In the radio opera, their example makes concrete on the one hand the suffering caused by ideologies, and on the other hand the strength they drew from their music to survive.



Albena Vrachanska Petrovic & Matthias Theodor Vogt

The Bulgarian-Luxembourgian composer Albena Petrovic Vrachanska says in an interview: “ The topics of the Second World War and the persecution of the Jews are very close to my heart. One of my favorite poets is Else Lasker-Schüler (1869-1945), the greatest German expressionist poet, indeed the greatest German expressionist poet (I don't have to say it in the feminine form, because there is no female poet equal to her, nor any man who is as good an expressionist). In the years 1933-1935 she had to leave Germany. When the persecution of the Jews began, she was harassed in the streets. She decided to leave Nazi Germany, went to Switzerland, but did not get a visa and went to Jerusalem, where she ended her life's journey. It was a very tragic fate. “

Petrovic Vrachanska continues, “ Vera Lothar-Shevchenko (1901-1982) was a French pianist who met a Soviet diplomat in Rome and went with him as his wife to the Soviet Union when his term ended. There he became a victim of the regime - he was sent to the Gulag. She turns to the militia for information about him and is also sent to a camp. In order to survive in the camp, she plays on a board in her imagination and imagines that she is playing the piano... She never meets her husband again. After about 30 years, she leaves the camp and stays in the Soviet Union - she never returns to France. She was a victim of the Stalinist dictatorial regime.

The other victim was pianist Alice Herz Sommer (1903-2014), a Jewish woman born in Prague. She lived to the age of 110. She survived the Nazi concentration camp Theresienstadt. Alice's husband, also a musician, died in a concentration camp, and she was there with her young son Raphael Sommer. After the war, he grew up to be a remarkable cellist, but died in 2001 during a concert in Tel Aviv. After all she had been through, this woman had retained an incredible kindness and love for music and life.”

The film ‘The Lady in Number 6’ traces the fate of Alice Herz Sommer.

One might wonder why Else Lasker-Schüler's ‘Das Blaue Klavier’, of which there are already more than 50 certainly well-intentioned settings, is now being put on the banner once again. But this time it is quite different. It is not only about Lasker-Schüler's text, but other texts are interwoven; partly illustrative, partly as contemporary documents that focus on the respective historical situation as if in a burning glass. Next to sober texts, such as the Nuremberg Race Laws, there are love poems by Lasker-Schüler and Marina Zwetajewa as an extreme contrast. These make one painfully aware of the counter-world to the cruelty excesses of the ideologies.

Ultimately, the work thus leaves the genre boundaries of both the song cycle and the conventional opera far behind. In a sense, it becomes a documentary radio play, which quite fundamentally points to the terrible aberrations of human history. In order to see this possibility and to realize it coherently, first of all a creative librettist is needed, as it obviously is Matthias Theodor Vogt, whose choice of texts is extremely well thought-out and thus enriched by many different references and levels of interpretation.

These ambitious interpretations, however, must find their counterpart in an adequate musical substance, without which everything would be a good idea, but nothing more.

This task was congenially solved by Albena Petrovic Vrachanska. She is a master of classical compositional techniques as well as those of new music, a rather rare case today. In addition to serial techniques, especially the area of sound extensions of traditional instruments. She used these convincingly in the interpretation of the text, whether it was the scratching noise of the strings, the playing on the strings in the piano or the use of additional effect instruments. These are additionally played by all members of the ensemble (2 singers, string quartet, piano, percussion).

On the traditional side, on the other hand, the artistically conscious voice leading and a good intuition for melody, rhythm, harmony, the central characteristics of music, mind you, are exactly those that are so readily neutralized by the representatives of new music, one could also say: neglected.

Albena Petrovic does not shy away from methods that generate a music of timeless beauty and expressiveness within the framework of text interpretation or as a necessary musical contrast. She can convincingly compose a *Lacrima*, an *Ave Maria*, and she risks it. In the context of noise surfaces and percussive passages, often integrated into a sound surface architecture, she thus gives the old

triads an expressive power, and this is what matters here, that they could in no way have in a classical context. An expressive power that is contemporary in the best sense.

Formally, in keeping with the libretto, the result is a varied sequence of self-contained musical tableaux, some of which also recur at dramaturgically appropriate points.



Cynthia Knoch & Naama Liany

The final authority for the realization of this radio opera concept is, of course, the performers; without them, everything would remain paper. The two singers Cynthia Knoch and Naama Liany put their beautiful and multi-faceted voices into the service of the work with great sensitivity and commitment. The same can be said of the musicians of the ensemble MYX'D, who mastered with aplomb not only the beautiful tones but also, without reservation, the considerable range of sound effects required. Matthias Theodor Vogt did not miss the opportunity to take over the part of the spoken texts himself, brilliantly delivered.

All in all, 'Das Blaue Klavier' is a very positive concert experience, because not only the ugly grimace of totalitarian ideologies is presented and denounced, but also the counter-world of genuine love and deep humanity appears, almost more clearly in the music than in the lyrics. This counter-world is not just a beautiful illusion, however, because the protagonists (the two pianists) themselves have experienced it under adverse conditions, not least through their involvement with the music.

One would wish that such works could also be heard in Paris or Berlin, those self-proclaimed metropolises of New and Contemporary Music, which frequently present little sustainable and ultimately epigonal music production of the very latest date. Why could the Bulgarian National Radio and the 54th Sofia Music Weeks accomplish to make hear 'Das Blaue Klavier'? Who will take over the staged premiere?