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Politics and poetry: Vivier and Stockhausen in Geneva

★★★★☆ ?

By Elodie Olson-Coons, 19 March 2016

The 2016 edition of Geneva's Archipel festival aims to explore works to do with childhood, experimentation, dreams, and the untethered imagination of [youth and play](#). The [Ensemble Contrechamps](#)/Haute École de Musique de Genève's programme, "Scènes du rêve et de l'enfance", chooses a rich and strange facet of this whimsy.

The concert is heavy with ideas of dreams and liminality, paralysis and passings-through. Staging Claude [Vivier](#) alongside his old teacher [Stockhausen](#) is a coherent choice, highlighting the common threads between the two composers, but also providing an almost post-Romantic foil to the theatrical, experimental *Trans*. Vivier's *Lonely Child* and *Wo bist du Licht?* are two sung works haunted by darkness, preoccupied with disappearance. The composer was abandoned by his mother as a child, and the scars of this sadness are scattered throughout his writings: in *Lonely Child*, he imagines her singing a lullaby.

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"Its drifting fog of strings exists outside conventional harmonic grammar"

Reviewed at Bâtiment des Forces Motrices, Geneva on 18 March 2016

PROGRAMME

Vivier, *Lonely Child*, for soprano and orchestra

Vivier, *Wo bist du, Licht!*

Stockhausen, *Trans*



Ensemble Contrechamps

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The piece is a dreamscape, pinned into narrative form by the scansion of timpani, gong and finger cymbals. Its world lies somewhere between the liturgical and the fairytale: the text mentions swallows, fairies, jade palaces and monks. Its drifting fog of strings exists outside conventional harmonic grammar, "intervalised," as Vivier put it: "There are no more chords and the whole orchestral mass is, in this way, transformed into timbre." This is the golden age of spectral music, after all.

Soprano [Anouk Molendijk](#) was, at times, absorbed into these webs of sound. Her voice sounded a little dry, though it warmed in the lower registers, and much of the text was lost. However, her technical mastery of the score was flawless. Meanwhile, the Ensemble Contrechamps and the Orchestre de la Haute Ecole de Musique de Genève became one for the evening without any visible friction, and carried off the production with aplomb. The strings, centre-stage throughout the concert, never faltered, and the percussion section shone in their torchbearing role.

Wo bist du Licht! is a darker piece, in terms of both theme and timbre. The singer drops into the deeper, grainy end of the mezzo-soprano range and, in the opening, the players press their bows into their strings as hard as possible, creating an unsettling rasping sound. The sung text of Hölderlin's *Der blinde Sänger* is superimposed with recordings of disturbing and emotional texts: Martin Luther King's last speech, Robert Kennedy's assassination, news descriptions of scenes of torture, and collages of abstract, made-up words (Vivier's signature onomatopoeic poetry). The words "Wo bist du, Licht?" echo through the emerging tapestry of sound like a call for help, or for illumination. Harmony, too, floats through, as major chords twist in and out of the background. It is a beautiful piece, poetic and political, and it was beautifully performed.

If *Lonely Child* is imagined as a kind of wish fulfilment, *Trans*, too is the product of

PERFORMERS

Anouk Molendijk, *Mezzo-soprano*

Ensemble Contrechamps

Haute école de musique Genève
Orchestra Academy

Pierre-André Valade, *Conductor*

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a dream, quite literally so: it came to Stockhausen as a vision, fully formed, which he leapt from his bed to jot down. "A wall of sound," he wrote, "opens at regular intervals (...) allowing the music behind to come through." The staging is striking, with the strings sitting in rows staring right at the audience, their bows unnervingly parallel. (The rest of the orchestra is hidden backstage.) Purple light and smoke – part of the composer's original dream – engulf them as the surging, anxious mass of sound begins to build.

The piece is incredibly effective at disorientation: the woodwinds and percussion heard in the distance feel unanchored and foreign. Meanwhile, recordings too play a narrative part, as the percussive sounds of loom shuttles seem to shoot across the stage. Soloists stand up, their hectic songs cut-out from the chaos: at one point, a trumpet-player climbs a tower for his battle-cry; at another, all of the strings swing around to point inwards, circling the first violinist. The *mise-en-scène* of uneasy stagnation and disruption is impressive.

Sudden, stunning silences feature in all three of the evening's pieces, and each time the performers froze in place – it was incredibly effective. In *Trans*, this 'silent cadenza' is followed only by a brief coda, waves of bells and brass – then silence, again, as the curtain slowly descends.

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★★★★☆

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