

JACQUES BANK

In *Key Notes 25*, a magazine of *Musical Life in the Netherlands*, there is an article by Joep Straesser on the composer Jacques Bank, who was born in 1943. In the same issue is a short composition by Bank **A very bad Character**, solo for male voice.

This odd title made me forget the rest of the magazine's contents, and I skipped the pages quickly until I found it.

Although I am not a musician I had struggled through enough scores while listening to recordings to know that I was looking at a remarkable piece of music. As I followed the vocal line across the page I became aware that what I had in fact thought were a few explanatory notes at the end of the piece, were in fact the text itself and that the relationship between the words and the music was like the relationship between two hands wringing together in despair.

The words were astonishing; a complete dismissal; a verbal execution of an ordinary unremarkable human being in the disinterested official language of a public record from the early 19th century dealing with the trial and conviction of petty criminals.

The words began: 'Thomas Willetts Number 1809', and went on to describe his condition and physical appearance, 'Trad: None... Head: Small... Eyes: Grey... Mouth: Wide'. And they ended with the remark; 'Character: Very Bad'.

He was 'Convicted 7 years transportation, for stealing stockings and garden vegetables', and 'Arrived in Van Diemen Land August 1834'.

I eventually had the opportunity of hearing this piece, which forms the first part of **Australiana** on tape, sung by Charles van Tassel. The pieces which follow are joined by an accordion which seems to express both the panic of the helpless victims as they are lashed into submission and the remorseless cruelty of those who drive them into complete physical and mental breakdown.

While listening, I became aware of something which Bank often seems to achieve in his vocal writing; something which had already been apparent to me when I read that first score and saw a wringing of hands in joining of words with musical notes; it was if a complete physical presence was struggling into existence through the sound of a voice – an entire body with all its movements, gestures and functions was being emitted through the performer's mouth.

The extreme range of vocal demands was wrenching the singer inside out, and emerging from his lips in the insanely matter of fact words was the forgotten victim in all his terror and pain and hopelessness.

At the end of **Australiana** are the words 'Oh my God' sung three times over a single repeated note in the accordion. Who is it that sings them? The convict? The listener? The answer is I think all three, because by the end of this terrifying work fear has dissolved all individuality. We are all one.

In reading Straesser's essay *The Narrow Path of Jacques Bank* I noted several points, but the most important were all concerned with the fact that 'Bank employs text in most of his compositions, nay it is even texts and their side-line effects that are the very starting point of a composition'.

Straesser points out that 'Unlike many compositions of the 60's and 70's in which the sound structure of the text was stressed ... Bank employs his texts mainly with the emphasis on their meaning'.

In these two quotes from Straesser however I wonder about the use of the word 'employs' or more precisely I wonder whether Straesser has correctly stated who employs who. Certainly, as I understand it Bank does not see himself as being in a position to employ anything. Quite the opposite; he is employed by the text.

While listening to several of his works I have been struck by the idea that Jacques Bank offers himself as a host to the discarded and forgotten fragments of existence in exactly the same way that a body can be a host to one or a number of parasites. Within him, these maimed and thwarted scraps of existence are given the opportunity to become so intensely and powerfully themselves that finally we cannot fail to complete the circle and recognise ourselves within them.

But why? Why should a composer choose these most desperate and frightening of images? Why

should he place himself at the mercy of the most painful and terrible of events?

Straesser points in the direction of an answer when he remarks on the tragi-comic and ironic elements in Bank's work, but he does not explain further than the general remark 'I am convinced that in his compositions Bank sometimes succeeds in touching upon the roots of human existence in a very personal and original way'.

This is excellently put and I agree wholeheartedly, and perhaps one should leave it at that. Bank touches those roots of human existence because he is prepared, as Straesser says, to write works which 'Feature a person, or group of persons in abnormal circumstances and mostly in conspicuously tragi-comic situations'. He is, in other words, prepared to look squarely at the nature of pain and suffering and loss and injustice and cruelty and failure and capitulation in the face of the inevitable.

I would like, however, to be a little more precise about my own feelings as to why Bank allows himself to be the victim of abnormal circumstances and tragi-comic situations.

In a letter which I received from Jacques Bank in the summer of 1991 he says 'The moment I feel something like a stitch in the side while reading a text, I know that sooner or later I will include those words in one of my compositions'.

It is a physical transference of another's pain into his own body which begins the process of composition and by following that pain as it forces an entry, Bank finds a way into his own creativity.

The sensitivity and understanding which he shows towards the 'abnormal circumstances' and 'tragi-comic' situations of others is the result of his uncompromising attitude towards his own task as an artist. The 'irony' mentioned by Straesser springs from the realisation that his own occupation places himself firmly in the ranks of those who are in despair. And this 'irony' is doubly compounded; firstly because he has chosen to put himself in the predicament and secondly by the fact the continuation and intensification of the initial pain, through the process of composition is self-inflicted.

If Bank's work is about those who are in 'abnormal circumstances', as Straesser says, Bank knows that the most abnormal circumstance of all is that in which the artist finds himself. He has not been punished into this circumstance, but has recognised it as his own and has accepted the task; a task which demands that he shall give the time during which he is alive to a process which requires absolute obedience and over which at times he can have no control whatsoever. But it is through this willingness to step with eyes wide open into a circumstance which only a madman or fool would consider that, as Straesser says 'Bank sometimes succeeds in touching upon the roots of human existence in a very personal and very original way'.

Each piece Bank writes becomes an embodiment of its subject, the isolated individual whose sense of being has been ruthlessly shaped by circumstance. Through the text which chooses him and the creative response within him, Bank allows the music to make a direct and naked communication of the human condition.

Because he has chosen, or has been manoeuvred by the intensity of his feelings into an attitude of total commitment to the expression through his art, of the individual sense of existence in its most intense manifestations, Bank of necessity must work with texts in which the individual's being is under extreme stress. By drawing these threats onto himself and by confronting the extremest threat of all, the possibility that as an artist he will not be able to find the means to express and consequently render them temporarily powerless, Jacques Bank is in the most 'abnormal' and dangerous position of all and is therefore a truly original and important composer.

I thank Joep Straesser for allowing me to quote from his essay *'The Narrow Path of Jacques Bank'*

DAVID BARTON

published in *INTIMACY* nr 2, June 1993

Editor: Adam McKeown, Maidstone, Kent ME16 8SD, United Kingdom