

JACQUES BANK: THE TENSION BETWEEN MUSIC AND TEXT

'If, in reading a text, I feel something like a stitch in my side, I know immediately that sooner or later I will use it in one of my compositions.'

This comment made by Jacques Bank gives a good idea of how important texts are for him in creating his music. Often, they form the direct catalyst of a new piece, as though the emotional response generated by the words must be crystallized in music. A stitch in the side leading to a composition: surely, there are few composers who would dare make such a confession.

Music and text, however, have always maintained a complex interrelationship with one another. Some, for example Boris de Schloezer in his standard work on J.S. Bach, conjecture that the success of a vocal composition can be gauged by the degree to which the listener follows the text. As music can refer to nothing other than itself, too much attention to text detracts from attention paid to the music. Seen in this way, words are nothing more than a reservoir of vocal sound, or merely a spark to set the composer's creative processes in motion.

Text is given a decidedly more significant role in the work of Jacques Bank, for he almost without exception takes care that the words are clearly intelligible, often also incorporating them as recited passages. Even those pieces that at first appear to be purely instrumental almost always incorporate recited or sung at some point: a pianist plays and speaks at the same time, a duet for two recorder players that begins and ends with a recited text, a flute quartet with a soprano added, and so on. Bank, moreover, shows a marked preference for texts that on the surface appear business-like and neutral, but on deeper reflection leave 'a stitch' in one's side. An extreme example of this is the song for solo men's voice, *A very bad Character*, in which the dry description of a 'criminal' in a nineteenth-century English legal report concludes with the summary: Character: very bad. David Barton, in an article on Jacques Bank, describes the relationship between the music and this barren, dispassionate text as follows: 'The relationship between the words and the music is like the relationship between two hands wringing together in despair.' The vocalist cries out in the suffering that has been ironed away in this sober judicial report. The text's emotion is crystallized into music. But the process of transmutation must be approached with the greatest circumspection by the composer: if pathos were too directly translated into music it could become maudlin, the musician be reduced to an exhibitionist. For this reason, Bank relies heavily on the stylistic tools of hidden meaning, humour and irony: the ecstasy of a seduced lady-in-waiting runs awry of the musical climax, finding expression instead in the vocalist's airy chattering. In *Mesmerised* (1977) Bank set Gerard Manley Hopkins's words written in 1873, 'I wish to die and not to see the inscapes of the world destroyed anymore', in a restrained vocal line whose enormous inner tension is fortified by a high trumpet tone.

Through such devices the relationship between text and musical form becomes indescribably rich in variety and, because content is in a certain sense predetermined in a composition whose text leaves a 'stitch in the side', the compositional process takes the form of a struggle to give form to the content, to control, to design a

musically interesting substance for the emotion. To quote David Barton once again: 'Bank does not employ a text. He does not see himself in a position to employ anything. Quite the opposite; he is employed by the text.'

In this light, it should come as no surprise that Jacques Bank had in fact little feeling for serial music, with which he was involved as a beginning composer. Examining an early piece such as *The Memoirs of a Cyclist* (1967), for two recorders, we find that the composer did indeed make use of a twelve-tone row, but on hearing the work one is struck by the typically Bankian drama grafted to the serial traits: the gesture of the various motifs seems to have been more important than the strict application of the rows. Once again, moreover, text is heard before the actual music begins and also runs concurrent with it. The musicians are instructed to alternately speak and play, and while playing, 'to stand with exaggerated ceremoniousness' and declaim with exaggerated pathos. Even in this early work, the irony and the peculiar choice of text, so characteristic of Bank's music, is unmistakably present, although here the text is superimposed on the music so to speak: the relationship between text and music was as yet very indirect.

The definitive change came with *Last Post* (1975), for bass clarinet and piano, where words and music enter into a tightly-knit but complex interrelationship. The text of this piece was taken from a short news report that appeared in 1975 in *The Observer* in which a certain Alfredo Campoli related how as boy of eleven he had sung the Ave Maria for wounded World War I soldiers, some of whom died before his eyes: 'Oh my God. They died in front of me. I remember two died before I finished the Ave Maria.' The almost obscene antithesis between the celestial calm of the Ave Maria and the horrific suffering of the wounded soldiers is musically translated in the outright ugliness of the bass clarinet part - *Flatterzunge*, simultaneous singing and playing - set against a serene piano part. The patterns of repetition are grotesquely disrupted time and again as though the soldiers' agonies stab through the musical fabric.

The form and material of this piece seem at each moment to be connected in one way or another to the text, or even derived from it. At the same time, it is obvious that the composer balances on a fine edge and at times is in danger of stumbling: when on p. 10 of the score the complete Campoli text is alternately recited again by the two musicians, punctuated by instrumental interruptions that build to a climax on the text 'Ave Maria', the relationship between the drama of the words and the music is so straightforward that the two mediums move too much in step, instead of setting each other in relief. Predicability lurks. But who would fault the composer with having the courage to take such a risk?

The exquisite *Mesmerised*, composed in late 1977, demonstrates further economizing of means and more far-reaching intensification of the relationship between text and music. As with all of Bank's compositions, the setting is both original and extraordinary: three trumpets, one piano and three percussionists accompanying a soprano who sings entries from the diaries of the estranged, nineteenth-century English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889). In this piece Bank so successfully forges a synthesis between text and music that the whole is not only greater than the sum of its parts but yields, moreover, something entirely new and unforgettable. In the second movement, the short line 'Cold. Resolved to be a religious' is brilliantly set to the heterophony of two icy trumpets with wow-wow

muting filling in a minor third, with interruptions from the percussionists striking an anvil. Textual depiction is evident but at the same time the musical substance is fascinating. When the soprano sings the word 'religious' she climbs in a single breath to the trumpet's high register and at the same moment these two instruments are suddenly silenced. The soprano reaches to just a minor second under the top tone of the first trumpet, but then a descending timpani glissando steals her breath away and an imposing silence follows. She has fallen short of the sublime peak of the highest tone, failed to gain redemption through religion.

Bank displays the wealth of his capabilities in *Minutes of Lives* (1982), a more than half-hour-long work for clarinet quartet and soprano. Here, he first demonstrated his new technique of composing, one that he continues to employ in a wide range of forms. The tone material is ordered in a six-tone row which is gradually transformed as one or another constituent is replaced by a new tone. In this way, the pitch reservoir is continually renewed and the addition of a new tone at an important expressive moment can be used for surprise. At times, the six-tone row takes on the character of a mode; then, there are manifold patently tonal implications in the row which are musically exploited by the composer.

In *Requiem voor een levende* (1985), for reciter, choir, 9 accordions(!), 4 saxophones and 3 double basses, the basic material is - not coincidentally - a diminished seventh chord which is broadened to a six-tone row through the addition of two tones. While this material offers the composer the possibility of alluding to music history, he nonetheless strips the diminished seventh chord of its traditional harmonic implications by having it sounded, unchanged, over many pages of the score. The rhythmic aspect becomes more important than the eventual harmonic tension in the chord and associations with minimal music emerge, although these are invariably quite brief. The musical realization of the word 'requiem' in this fifty-minute work exploits every possible connotation: from reflective calm to a protest screamed out by the complete choir.

Given his penchant for drama in music, it would be of great interest to see what Bank would do in the operatic genre. It is thus doubly regrettable that his short opera, *Een Tanthologie* (1987) has yet to have been performed on stage.

In the beginning of the nineties Bank composed a number of works which, although not directly intended for children, were based on texts written for or by children. For example, he asked ethnic minority students of a school in Amsterdam to write a personally tinted fairy-tale. Then, exploring the fantasy of these texts with a compassionate rather than ironical approach, Bank set them to music in his *Gebroken sprookjes* (1991, Broken Fairy-Tales).

It was but a small, logical step from the *Requiem* of 1985 to *Episodes de la vie d'un artiste* (1994). The figure of Berlioz has been an important source of inspiration for Bank. This French composer's highly personal perception of reality was inextricably connected with his musical predilections in which ironic distancing played a significant role. The artist's experiences in daily life inevitably seep into and shape his creative work. So it is with Bank as well. The texts he uses invariably deal with people who are taken in the grasp of their surroundings in life, and the perception of everyday reality permeates his music.

As the composer phrased it, attention to 'earthy emotionalism' enhances the value of life. Similarly, Jacques Bank's fine tuning to the drama that surrounds us in life gives his music an added value that can be deeply stirring for the sensitive listener.

Jurrien Sligter
(transl. John Lydon)