

Peter Rak

Karmina Šilec, artistic director and conductor of Carmina Slovenica, has repeatedly included the works of Jacob Cooper, one of the most acclaimed composers on the music scene today; and this time Cooper wrote a cycle of songs for 16 solo voices, electro-acoustic music and live sound processing specifically for her ensemble. In collaboration with the poet Dora Malech, they set the theme – initially with the working title *Requiem for the Animals* – which focuses on the ethical dimensions of the sanctity of life, so *Threnos* touches on the meaning of killing life. Animals, as a marginalized subject, are a starting point, a metaphor, and the idea itself comes from the ancient Greek mourning song. The modern slaughterhouse is a place and an inspiration and, above all, a place where man, animal and machine meet. This environment is profane and at the same time remote, and in this remoteness the slaughterhouse becomes an inaccessible sanctuary and creates a place for litany or mourning, for *threnos*.

The pre-premiere was staged fairly quickly and without the participants from the USA, as the project was threatened with the coronavirus outbreak.

Due to the new circumstances the process of creating the work was marked by the situation brought about by the virus. The premiere planned for March 20 was uncertain, as was the presence of the art team. We pre-premiered the work without the Sidra Bell Dance Company, and the performance was a valuable experience for us.

The performance gives a voice to those who don't have it, i.e. to the animals.

At first glance, the work is about the caring for animals, but in reality it is about people, about us, and our sense of guilt. We feel it is important that the composition creates an opportunity to reflect on the necessary radical transformation of human-animal relations. Therefore, the work certainly requires a certain confrontation from the viewer or the listener, between what he knows to be right and how he lives and functions. At a certain level, this, of course, aims at a strengthening of the viewer's and the artist's consciousness in terms of developing a critical attitude towards the naturalization of violence against animals and human beings. This staging seeks to extend the limits of this sensibility, but without relying solely on compassion. *Threnos* offers what is usually hidden or concealed as a place for reflection.

The project has a character of a kind of profane dedication or dedicated profanity.

In a certain way, yes. Namely, we designed a cycle with the titles of the sentences Litany, Reflection, Sustainability, Purification, Swearing, Regret, Withdrawal, and these are a sort of "paraliturgical" sentences.

Such a ritual mass could be described as either an attempt to establish a new, different ethos or as a blasphemy?

I think that both characterisations are wrong. I believe that *Threnos* falls more into the field of meditation than in the context of any new rite.

"Recognizing the sacrifice animals make for us as we eat them" – isn't this a mystification of the purely industrial process today?

The composer Cooper said about the piece that it is probably a fairly controversial one since most people, as carnivores, regularly "participate" in the killing of animals. The work is by no means a messenger and a call to vegetarianism and veganism, instead it brings a more complex thought: it wants to remind the carnivorous human being to recognize the sacrifice animals make for us when

we eat them. But probably more important than thinking about the sacrifice that animals make for us is to think about how, and whether it is possible to get out of this exploitative, anthropocentric point of view and action, and whether there is possibility for a new posture. Today, man's attitude towards everything that is not human is still trapped in this traditional, vicious circle of the binary relationship between man and animal or nature. *Threnos* tries to speak to the audience about the fragility of life, both animal and human. It offers contemplations about how urgent it is to change human attitudes towards animals and, consequently, our own, human species.

The industrial slaughtering process establishes the most evident way to neutralize the problem and make it invisible.

We are surrounded by the industry of cruelty and killing. Unlike the cruelest humiliation we know from wars, this industry even goes beyond such principles, mainly because it has no end. It is a strange kind of scam because we are all victims of this world of commerce. That is why in *Threnos* everything in a way revolves around the issue of life and the violent, illegitimate death that modern society legalizes.

The industrialization of death manifests itself in the play with repetitiveness, mechanics, laboratory sterility, minimalism ... and this applies to music as well as to choreography, costume design and set design.

Slaughterhouses are a place where man, machine and animal meet. Through this connection between technology, man and animals, it is a questioning of the contemporary social paradigm in which man, by excessive praising of his own culture, almost completely destroys nature. This further leads to the reflection of how nature can nevertheless survive, perhaps even without man, and whether, as a consequence, this human-machine relationship can bring us a different view of the man-animal relationship. This human-machine-animal triangle is, in the extreme, interfering with human issues and placing them as some naked lawless bodies in the global processes of control and killing. This also guided the staging that leans on these spaces. The sonic processing of the human voice represents this aspect of the "machine" and is reminiscent of the fragility and vulnerability of the human and animal voice, as well as of some kind of expansion of life, or of the living as a whole.

Carmina Slovenica has in the recent decades embodied the concept of invention and perfection, winning numerous international awards and touring on all continents. The decision of the expert commission of the Slovenian Ministry of Culture to abolish long-term financing, however, did not mean the definitive cessation of activities?

Carmina Slovenica operates as a multi-activity production company. Our programme has adapted to these given financial circumstances which have changed dramatically. We now do projects, both in the field of concert and music theatre activities, internationally, in publishing and education. We continue to cultivate an innovative musical and music-stage approach to our own production. The emphasis, however, is on the exploratory character of creating vocal and contemporary music. The *Threnos* musical performance was entrusted to the project crew of the Choregie New Music Theatre, and this year's other novelty – *Stabat Mater / Letters to a Son* was performed with the ensemble jKebataola!

Your departure to Harvard in the academic year 2018/19 further exacerbated the speculations about Carmina Slovenica ceasing all activities.

I have the experience of one year working in a stimulating research environment provided by the Harvard Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies. The invitation came just at the moment when I needed the conditions and the time to develop new ideas. This seemed very refreshing to me as I was able to dedicate my time to the researching of materials for new projects ahead of me and to the developing of fields of activity. I am establishing a new concept of creating acoustic and electro-acoustic music, digital-analogue works, especially in connection with the so-called real-time processing of live audio signals. This is about connecting the voice and some gestural components, the interfaces for motion analysis. This is of great interest to me as I see in this the form of "extended voices" and also an extended form of working with movement. A kind of computer-aided gesture, which, in a way, is a logical continuation of conducting and expanding a vocal instrument, all in connection with contemporary media.

The working environment at Harvard is probably ideal?

The Harvard environment is exceptional in every way, as it gives you unlimited access to professional literature, state-of-the-art studios and a variety of information, in short everything you need to study in-depth. I was completely overcome by their collections, such as that at the Center for Hellenic Studies where I studied the Homeric form of oral narration. I was developing the concept for my new project that will be premiered in 2021 in San Francisco. Namely, I received an order for a new project from the Hewlett Foundation – for theatre, music theatre and spoken word. We are working on a project that will be based on some elements of Homeric epic storytelling and inspired by "sworn virgins."

The academic environment, on the one hand, can be somewhat sterile, but on the other hand it offers one the luxury to be completely focused on work without the daily technical and administrative duties and to interact with experts in a wide variety of fields.

In the environment of the Institute for Advanced Studies each of the participants is focused on their core project, and interacting with scientists, including mathematicians, anthropologists, astronomers, chemists, archaeologists ..., and, of course, artists from different fields, there are issues arising about your work that are different, and you get different feedback to the one you are used to. This is not about the responses of the professional public or the audience, not even conversations with colleagues, but about the exchange of views with analytical and interested partners in conversation. In fact, in real life, none of us who have shared this common year have the conditions to be able to share their work with such discerning thinkers and creators and have such conditions for the thinking and work. It seems to me almost like a slogan that Radcliffe gave us the time we all needed.