

INTERVIEW

We are about to see the world premiere of *Threnos* by the American composer Jacob Cooper, who you and the poet Dora Malech have been developing for four years, performed by your new music theatre ensemble Choregie. So what does this long phase of preparation/maturation bring?

The collaboration with the composer Cooper goes back to 2012 when we first performed his work *Stabat Mater* in *Placebo*. That same year we also designed the project *Was haben sie gegen Bauern, gnädige Frau?* with Cooper's *Silver Threads* cycle. Cooper is an author we love to perform and I was glad he decided to dedicate his full-length work to my ensemble.

We started off by designing *Threnos* at first as a pseudo rite of worship – a new ritual – at the death of animals, like a requiem at the death of humans. We tried to conceive a concept which would establish a juncture between art and death. We would meet, write texts, search for a musical language, conduct workshops. It was a truly collective creative process. From the first version, which was studied in the summer of 2017, till now we have been looking for nuances, and now the work is ready for the listeners.

2. The *Threnos* project – for vocal soloists and sound processing, that will premiere on March 20 in the Minorites church, is a requiem, a necropastoral mass for killed animals?

With our performance we try to offer a place for reflection on what is usually being hidden or disguised. The idea for the song comes from the ancient Greek mourning song and is a kind of paraliturgical service, reminiscent of a mass for the dead (animals).

We were interested in the structure of a ritual murder and that is why we touch on the taking of life, the economy of death. We all know that this is a key issue against the backdrop of the issue of eating meat, which has gone far beyond the human needs for animal protein. It is not only a matter of survival, but also a remnant of ancient sacrificial structures.

With the idea of the 'man-animal-machine' triangle we also introduced a sonic processing of the human voice which represents the aspect of the 'machine' (using digital rumours) and is reminiscent of the fragility and vulnerability of the human/animal (voice) and the 'elongation' of life/the living .

2.a. The motto of the performance is shame?

It is more about the consciousness and respect for life, that is, about a different understanding of the world and nature, which puts the right to life of all living beings in the foreground. We recognize that we have decided to look away from the things that trouble us or are difficult. Animals are, as a marginalized subject, a starting point, a metaphor. But it is basically about a human being and the contemplation about him. The problem of us, humans, is that we see too much and smell too much. The senses of smell, taste, vision and hearing are good for us to enjoy living in some perfect world. But when the world is not perfect, we put blinkers on our senses. We look away.

3. A 16-member solo female cast; but the project also involved the American Sidra Bell Dane Company.

The musical part is performed by the new music theatre project cast Choregie, assembled especially for *Threnos*. The performers have extensive musical and theatrical experience gained through their collaborations with the ;Kebataola! ensemble, the Carmina Slovenica Vocal Theatre, the Ljubljana and Maribor National Theatre and Opera. Another part of the team is the internationally renowned boutique dance troupe of creative movement illustrators, based in New York. The Sidra Bell Dance Company performs and nurtures a canon of innovative and advanced dance theatre.

Sidra Bell and I met more than ten years ago and have since met in different parts of the world and followed each other's creative work. Our first collaboration dates back to 2016 when Sidra worked as a Movement Advisor to *Fortuna Won't Be Fauvel's Match!*, performed by Carmina Slovenica. This time, also our ensembles will collaborate for the first time.

4. You have already performed with Jacob Cooper's work. We remember the project *Was Haben Sie Gegen Bauern, gnädige Frau?* in Cankarjev dom Ljubljana. That performance, like *Threnos*, was about a juncture of art and death ... Cooper is a really famous contemporary composer, a Yale graduate – did you work together at Radcliff?

No, we didn't. But at Harvard I started working with a visual artist Young Yoo Lee who made videos for *Threnos*. These are based on charcoal drawings and 3D scans.

5. *Threnos*'s locus is the throat, the place where songs resound, but also the place of slaughter, the field of vulnerability. Exciting premises, without doubt.

One of the starting points was the throat/voice, or Hegel's thought that "each animal finds its voice in its violent death". The throat is the place that connects the mourners and the (be)mourned in a common physicality, the place where sonority exits. The throat is a metaphorical centre of speech, singing, as well as vulnerability, and therefore a place of distinction between humans and animals, between what is human and what animalistic. We were cautious about the issues around the concept of *humanity* and *animality*. We questioned integrative theories – the one that seeks to establish an equality based on similarity between animals and humans (based on the idea of "they are just like us"), and the one that tries to write humanity into the space of animality (promotes the idea of "we are just like them"). In short, we have opened spaces for critical reflections on animality, humanity, and one could perhaps recognize in this the idea of the deconstructing of the binary, that is, the principle that divides the world into that of human beings and that of the animals.

6. Care for animals as an ideology today, animalism as a political category and ethics-related humanity – all these are the basic premises of your engagement this time around.

With *Threnos*, we explore our lives, our interactions with animals, our closeness and distance from them. We see time and again how characteristic of the whole process, otherwise called civilization, is segregation. Hiding what has become annoying to us away from our sights. And the slaughterhouse is again just a metaphor.

It was also important for us to set the stage for the work so that it cleverly creates opportunities for the reflection on the radical transformation of man-animal relationships. Such as would require a certain confrontation from the viewer/listener, but above all aim at a strengthening of his/her consciousness in

the sense of developing a critical attitude towards the naturalization of violence against animals and humans. We sought to set *Threnos* so that our attempts to expand the limits of this sensibility would not rely solely on compassion. We feared that the elements of compassion would instrumentalize the project into a means of politicization. The economy of death not only touches on the attitude of humans to animals, but also on the relationship of humans to humans, humans to nature... Through the "voices" of rightless animals, through the mode of treatment we recognize man (from Aborigines in Australia, Jehovah's Witnesses in modern Russia, Argun in Chechnya, present-day camps in Kakuma, Dagahaley, Ifu and Hagadera (Kenya), Zaatar (Jordan), Yida (South Sudan), Katumbi and Mansham (Tanzania), Pugnid (Ethiopia), Panian (Pakistan)...

We are surrounded by an industry of humiliation, cruelty and killing that can compete with all that and what the Third Reich was capable of.

7. Genesis of Work – Masses for Dead Animals and Dead People ...?

In a way, everything revolves around the issue of life and the violent, illegitimate death legalized by the modern society. *Threnos* arose out of the necessity for a change in the attitude of human beings towards animals and, consequently, their (human) species. We are interested in the ethical dimension of the sanctity of life, so *Threnos* (by the throat) touches on the importance of killing life. We face this question in the field of our own anonymous destiny, when we see that we are replaceable, even with the third one, with technology.

8. The attitude man-animal; man's attitude to nature is the fundamental attitude today and is, as you say, the subject of artistic representations, from cave paintings to romantic landscapes; today we are faced with ecocriticism.

In order to act nonviolently towards animals, a radical transformation of all production processes would be necessary. Namely the question is, who is ruling the world today, man or some posthuman economy, this terrible machine of progress and consumer welfare. It is a hoax, because we all, including people, have become victims of this world of commerce.

9. Dora Malech

The poet has put it in the form of a paraliturgical service, which is brought by the titles of the sentences: *Litany, Reflection, Sustainability, Purification, Swearing, Regret, Withdrawal*. They are, or at least sound as if they were part of liturgical texts. *Threnos* also comes in part from Hubert Reeves's thought: "Man is the most insane species. He worships an invisible God and destroys a visible Nature. Unaware that this Nature he's destroying is this God he is worshiping."

10. What is the fate of the announced press conferences with the American artists? And will the premiere take place on March 20?

Due to the new circumstances the creative process was considerably influenced by the situation brought about by coronavirus. The planned premiere for March 20th is somehow in the air, as is the participation of the artistic team.

11. Can you still say something about the concept, dramaturgy, staging strategies. Why a project, why not a PERFORMANCE?

I have no opinion as to whether it is a show or a project. I think I say choregie project to all my events.

11. How and how much does music in the choregie concept define the "staging"?

Music dictates the movement through the arrangement of the stage space, which is why the relationship between the musical expression and the space, in which the expression is supposed to come to life, is important – their harmonious relationship is important. The musicality/sonority of the music is therefore transferred to the theatrical field.

The coexistence of two or more elements works according to the principle of integration in such a way that this integration forms an inseparable synthesis. The attention in creating a metacomposition – formed by music, word, the visual and movement – is that the musical principle guides all other aspects of the staging. It is a totality formed by all these individual elements. The reception of the performance depends on the listener's perception which compares, composes, differentiates and edits... This principle in Choregie applies to the whole performance, not just its musical happening. The whole production therefore seeks to follow the musical principle. In principle, the scenery, light and costumes do not come from the heads of their designers, but come from the basis or the background of the project. Like any project, *Threnos* also raises several questions, such as: What will the aesthetics be like? Should it be all harmonious or contradictory? Should it emphasize or hide something? What should lead? Or what should disturb, mislead, divert attention? What to ignore? What to support? And since the stage is a reflection of life, the venue is also a place of confrontation. The human eye responds to two things: light and movement. Each change of light causes an automatic psychological response in the viewer. And it works on a subconscious level, but it can be powerful and persuasive. This is why the light in dramaturgy is so very important. Set design seeks to encourage the viewers to think, to interact with the viewer. During the performance, a visual dialogue between the stage, the performer and the spectator takes place in a form of thinking and experiencing.