

you'll drown, dear / The White Princess

An interview with Sivan Eldar (composer) and Cordelia Lynn (librettist)

By AURÉLIE BARBUSCIA



“you’ll drown, dear” for mezzo soprano and electronics and “The White Princess” for two sopranos, percussion and electronics, are interconnected pieces that were developed in tandem at IRCAM and at the Festival d’Aix-en-Provence from December 2016 - June 2017.

Can you tell us something about the The White Princess? Where does the title come from?

CORDELIA: The original concept for the piece came from our colleague, set designer Aurélie Lemaigen. She had discovered Rainer Maria Rilke’s rare and beautiful Symbolist play *The White Princess* while working on Maeterlinck several years ago. She experienced a very powerful artistic connection to the text and a need to create something from it, and started collaborating with Sivan on an operatic scene based on Rilke’s play. Sivan increasingly felt she needed a new text to compose with, rather than a direct adaptation, which is where I came in.

Since then we’ve moved quite far away from Rilke’s original, but certain important ideas extant in his play provide the foundation for the new piece’s themes: internal and external worlds, fantasy and reality, movement and stasis: all these conflicting states. Also, although I’m writing a modern text, my approach to language is very poetic and image-heavy, so I’m enjoying this connection with Rilke’s style.

As for the title, we plan to change that soon but I haven’t thought of a good one yet...

The text speaks about two women, an old one and a young one. Why did you decide to focus on women and on the notion of time passing?

CORDELIA: I don't normally 'decide' to work with women characters, it just doesn't occur to me not to. I'm more struck by the vision and experience of a very old woman onstage who has a big part to play. We so rarely see this, in opera or in theatre, so it's immediately quite exciting and full of potential.

I wanted to set up a conflict and tension and difference between the two characters, and age seemed to be one way to represent this. There are other differences: the Old Woman is very still, the Young Woman is very active, the Old Woman is very internalised, concerned with her inner world, the Young Woman is very externalised, concerned with the world around her. But they are more connected than they think, and when they really meet something very explosive will happen. The boundaries between their worlds will blur and disintegrate. I don't think both of their worlds can survive, it's very hard for diverse worlds to coexist.

SIVAN: As a composer, I try to move beyond a literal interpretation of Cordelia's text. I am interested in ambiguity and in the tensions that emerge out of it, less so in dichotomies. An old woman and a young woman – what does it mean to be old, anyway? how are these two characters similar and how are they different? What is it that is pulling them closer? The voice is a complex instrument. Each person has multiple voices: from the chest to the head, though in reality the spectrum is much greater. For me this is where the beauty is.

As far as time is concerned, I love moments of near-stillness, where time feels suspended. The word "hanging" plays an important role in Cordelia's text, and it is intentionally left ambiguous. In Rilke's play, the Princess says to her sister « tout est le rêve que nous rêvons ; ce qui est court peut alors être long, ce qui est long l'est à n'en plus finir. Et le temps est espace » It is this quote that gave Aurélie the original idea for this piece, and it still resonates with me now as I am creating the sound-spaces that these characters move in and out of.

What are your influences and inspirations?

CORDELIA: I'm very inspired by my working relationship with Sivan and Aurelie. I've never worked so collaboratively before, but this process makes sense with this project and I've really been enjoying it.

I'm influenced by writers who challenge conventional forms, so Samuel Beckett, Sarah Kane, Caryl Churchill, Martin Crimp, Debbie Tucker Green. I think the libretto is coming into a new era of development where everything could change, the relationship between music and text could become something quite new and I think that's incredibly exciting: I want to push at and experiment with this form. Writing texts for opera is the place to be if you're a writer right now.

SIVAN: I like that Cordelia mentions Beckett. He is a writer who challenged literary form by also blurring the boundaries between drama and sound. His collaboration with Billie Whitelaw on works like *Not I* is especially interesting to me for that reason. Composers of course have been exploring the space between speaking and singing for quite a while. Personally, I find the vocal writing of Salvatore Sciarrino and Beat Furrer inspiring in that sense: they move fluidly within a wide vocal spectrum, and discover subtle and intimate expressive possibilities within the voice.

Does your affiliation with text affect your compositional technique or style in any way?

SIVAN: Yes! Much more so than I had predicted. This is my first time working with a dramatic text, so I constantly ask myself: what can I bring to it as a composer? Cordelia's text is powerful because every word is significant. I decided quite early on that I wouldn't use the music to dress the text, so to speak. But instead, that I would try to reveal what's hidden between the words through sound. It is a process of undressing, also of the voice; a search for clarity of expression. Finally, it is also where I find the musical drama.

Does your affiliation with music affect your writing technique or style in any way?

CORDELIA: Absolutely. When I write without the knowledge that music will be brought to my text, or that my text will be brought to music, it is essential to me to have an inherent, conscious rhythm and musicality in the language. When music is going to be added to the language, then it's important that the music of the language doesn't interfere with the composer's musicality and rhythm. The text is a kind of scaffold rather than a complete building. The music will complete it, but it can't be completed if it's already finished, it can only be added to, like decoration. And that's not the point of the music in opera, just to be decoration.

When writing with text, what is your main focus? What do you start with, as a composer, in practical terms?

SIVAN: I spend a lot of time with the text. I internalize it and try to understand its behavior: how it moves, how it breathes. Naturally I memorize it. Cordelia, Aurélie and I spent quite a bit of time in December and January talking about the character of the old woman. So by the time I received the first version of the text, I was more or less familiar with her world. The process wasn't all smooth though: we revised it several times before we reached the final version. I'm very grateful to Cordelia for that. It's a huge privilege to work so collaboratively with a writer.

When writing with music, what is your main focus?

CORDELIA: To provide a strong and beautiful scaffold for my composer's music to grow on. That is your responsibility as a writer for opera. Also, to inspire and challenge your composer with language, to push them to create startling and beautiful sounds and textures and stories. I've been told my text is difficult, well I'm very pleased about that, as long as it's interesting difficult not irritating difficult!

What is it about the human voice for you that makes it so attractive?

CORDELIA: The human voice can really reveal the inner character of words, or how many characters a word can have, and that's very interesting for a playwright. I have to think about words in a completely different way when I know they are going to be sung, because a singer will bring a very particular weight and focus to each word, so you better not choose the wrong one. I like that intellectual game, it's quite fun, and I enjoy the precision of it.

SIVAN: I was trained as a pianist, and most of my music is instrumental. And yet, when I compose, be it for an orchestra or for an ensemble, I normally use my voice. It is how I choreograph a musical gesture, or get a sense of the overall pace of the music. In other words, when I use my voice, I use my body. And this relationship between the voice and the body – between the internal process of sound production and the vibrations that are projected outside – is beautiful and complex. I feel there is a lot to explore there.