

MUSIC IN TOWN: THE MUSICAL SHELLS OF CALVINO AND VLADISLAVIĆ

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Sommario

L'articolo mette a confronto i testi per musica scritti da Italo Calvino e da Ivan Vladislavić, evidenziandone la comunanza di temi, toni e atmosfere. La produzione dello scrittore italiano nasce dal suo interesse per la musica e dalla sua amicizia con Luciano Berio e altri compositori; Calvino cercò di riformulare in maniera lirica temi a lui molto cari, quali la vita urbana e l'identità individuale e sociale dell'uomo moderno. Simili gli interessi del sudafricano Vladislavić, la cui affinità con Calvino, già manifesta nella sua produzione in prosa, si riflette anche nei testi musicali scritti per la compositrice italiana Lucia Ronchetti: essi presentano la metropoli moderna con uno sguardo ironico e postmoderno che si condensa (come già in Calvino) nella metafora della conchiglia.

Key Words: Avant-garde – Post-modernism – Metropolis

In a recent interview, Ivan Vladislavić admitted he approached Calvino's *Le città invisibili* because spurred by his readers: "Oddly enough, I only read *Invisible Cities*, which is the key text for me, much later. Some readers remarked that my first novel, *The Folly*, had clearly been influenced by *Invisible Cities* and so I thought I'd better read it to see what they were talking about" (Angelotti, Esposito, 2014:80). Notwithstanding his belated reading, *Le città invisibili* is the 'key text' for the South African writer so much as to quote it in the Author's Note at the end of his book *Portrait with Keys* (2006). Both authors were fascinated by the modern metropolis in terms of its spatiality as well as its sociality; for both of them the city is a challenge for its inhabitants and for any attempt at defining it. This fascination also reverberates in the texts they wrote for music.

They were both involved in these projects by a personal relationship with the composers: Calvino worked with a number of Italian and foreign musicians¹, among whom his friend – and a Ligurian – Luciano Berio; Vladislavić with the Italian composer Lucia Ronchetti, whom he met in Stuttgart in 2000. They were probably intrigued by the possibility of exploring a world, that of sound, which can only be partially reproduced by language. Although words obviously have a substantial musical nature, written words are mute: they can resonate only when they are read, and even in that case, they often resonate in one's private mind. These considerations help understand the powerful image of the shell, which recurs in both authors and in the librettos they wrote. Prose is but a shell, which resounds only if you press it to your ear and listen carefully. Also, for Calvino and Vladislavić, the city is a shell, and this entails a world of associations which touch upon many fields of human experience: nature, beauty, music, poetry, myth, fate all are evoked by the city-shell, the 'città-conchiglia' that lies on the shores of Italy and South Africa, and in most continents.

Calvino and Vladislavić's production for music is indebted to their earlier works in terms of texts, themes and perspective. However, the two writers are forced by the musical medium to sharpen, condense and intensify their language. This effect is achieved by a three-fold approach: re-writing texts, re-moulding themes, and re-defining perspectives, so that the pre-existing material is given new vigour, vividness and lyricism thanks to the new form and function it acquires. Calvino wrote a modern version of *Trovatore* by Verdi, he staged or transformed into lyrics some of his earlier tales, and investigated the city from the point of view of its sounds and noises, namely its speakers/inhabitants and the noise they make simply by living. Similarly, Vladislavić has re-written a German classic (Chamisso), has chosen portions of his *Portrait with Keys* and has given them a new arrangement, which is both visual and auditory. The theme of the city is approached by Calvino and Vladislavić with lyricism and irony, from a well-defined, precise point of view: that of

¹ Artists Calvino collaborated with are Sergio Liberovici, Piero Santi, Mario Peragallo, Bruno Gillet and Adam Pollock.

a middle-class man who looks upon city dwellers and events, speculates and gives his own interpretation of the hidden forces that draw urban people and shape spaces. This anthropological approach was sustained by the composers, whose musical pieces have a strong communicative intent, expressed through the use of voice and the musical theatre.

“Italo amava molto le canzoni in genere”, Berio remembered (1988:115), and indeed Calvino wrote songs which were meant to be popular folk songs. His interest in songs was due to their particular nature, in which words and music gain mutual reinforcement through correspondence and immediacy. In a song, words are easily understandable and the simplicity of the lyrics is reflected and enhanced by the simplicity of music. However, Calvino’s songs are not pure entertainment; on the contrary, they expand on the themes he dealt with in his short stories and novels: anti-militarism (as in the song *Dove vola l'avvoltoio*), memory (*Oltre il ponte*), anti-capitalism (*Sul verde fiume Po*), and women’s fragility or aggressiveness (*La tigre*). Modern city life is also presented in two songs about alienation: *Canzone triste*, and *Turin-la-nuit or Rome by night*. City life is here pictured from a two-fold social perspective: the working-class’s and the bourgeoisie’s. In *Canzone triste*, two spouses can only briefly meet between working shifts and their lives seem trapped and wasted in this alienating time flux². In *Turin-la-nuit or Rome by night*, Calvino depicts the habit of going to the cinema as an empty ritual which the bourgeoisie performs with *ennui*. In the songs two different types of routine are stigmatized for the same reason: a sense of giving up the *status quo* and renunciation to any possibility of real communication. Although records of the songs are not easy to find, from those available on the Internet we discover that the oral, colloquial form of the language used in the lyrics is mirrored by the linear, clinging nature of the music.

In *Canzone triste* and *Turin-la-nuit or Rome by night* Calvino carries on his critique of urban life in the tones and themes he had experimented in *Marcovaldo*, *Una nuvola di smog*, *La speculazione*

² The story was given a narrative form as short story and it was published with the title *Avventura di due sposi* in the collection *I racconti*, 1958.

edilizia in those same years, which also correspond to his political activism. In his songs, his *engagé* attitude interestingly meets 'la canzonetta', which is a tradition usually linked to light entertainment and escapism in Italy. The social edge of Calvino's songs reveal a consonance to the Turin movement of *Cantacronache*: a group of musicians, soon joined by writers, poets and intellectuals³, whose purpose was to "evadere dall'evasione" (Jona, 1958:5) and sing stories, chronicles or fables about common people's everyday life, difficulties and aspirations. It is not a naturalistic approach these artists advocated; on the contrary they shunned any neutral attitude in favour of a more critical, satirical or aggressive tone. This reflects in Calvino's songs, although he privileged a melancholic tone, mildly mitigated by his usual irony.

Irony can also be retraced in *La panchina* (1955), his first opera work, whose protagonist in pyjamas leaves his bed for a bench in the park in the hope of falling asleep. The story was later developed into a short story, published in *Marcovaldo* with the title *Una villeggiatura in panchina*. The difficulty of modern urban life is here addressed from the point of view of insomnia, which entails the problem of noise. The protagonist cannot find peace and silence in the city because noise surrounds him: the squabbling of two lovers, the songs of a drunkard, the invectives of prostitutes, the questioning of a policeman, the din of men working at repairing the tram-line. Finally, the newsboy's cry, as in a modern tragedy, announces the death of night, hence sleep too, killed by the day. While the songs focused on the alienation experienced by city dwellers both in their work routine and in their free time, in *La panchina* the analysis becomes more physical, showing how disruptive on human bio-rhythms are the consequences of disrupted natural time cycles. The metropolis that never sleeps is also a city whose inhabitants are unable to sleep, and hence to dream.

Disharmony, which is the central theme of the work, is paralleled at a musical level by parody and eclecticism. In her essay about *La*

³ Sergio Liberovici, Emilio Jonas, Michele Straniero and Giorgio De Maria were the founders of the group. Together with Calvino, other writers and scholars, such as Franco Fortini, Massimo Mila, Giacomo Manzoni, Piero Santi, Fiorenzo Carpi, contributed to the project. They also published a journal, *Cantacronache*.

panchina, Maria Corti, who was able to listen to Liberovici's score played by Gianandrea Gavazzeni, notes that "il parlato del libretto si alternava al cantato, al 'parlato con nota' e al 'suono di intonazione approssimativa'" (1978:203). She also highlights how the general effect was good, "soprattutto per la riuscita corrispondenza fra le parti ludiche del libretto e i *collages* musicali" (ibid.). However, after the play was performed at Teatro Donizetti, Bergamo, on 2 October 1956, the reviews were negative: the story, which was so far away from the traditional Italian melodrama, was accused of being neo-realistic and prosaic.

In the 1950s Calvino's main musical achievement⁴ was the libretto for *Allez-hop* (1959), which marked the beginning of Calvino's collaboration with Luciano Berio. They shared a common interest in structuralism, the philosophy of perception, and new theories on folklore and anthropology. Berio asked for Calvino's collaboration for *Allez-hop*, a "racconto mimico" which was performed at Teatro La Fenice, Venice, on 23 September 1959. The story is simple: a flea-tamer is performing his show in a night club, but one of his fleas rebels and jumps from one spectator to the other. The bored, insensitive audience of the night club immediately becomes alive, flirting and dancing. The flea moves from a businessman to the Head of the Police, then to politicians and ministers. A war breaks out. Then women stop the war. Finally, after the tamer manages to catch the flea, he realizes that the world without fleas would become boring again, so he frees all his fleas.

The opera includes six pieces for orchestra and two songs. Berio intended the songs as "due oggetti scenici, alla stregua di un armadio, un albero o una fontana" (1981:117) and "non hanno nessuna vera funzione musicale" (ibid.). But Calvino, who was enthusiastic about them, evidently did not consider them as subordinated elements. They deal again with the city. The first one is clearly New York: "Nella finestra guardo la città / con le luci della Fifth Avenue" (2004:679). The words of the songs and the description of the mime action, as

⁴ He also wrote *Lo spaventapasseri e il poeta* (probably, 1955), unpublished, which was intended for a ballet, and *Arie per l'opera buffa "Il visconte dimezzato"* (1958), written for the French composer Bruno Gillet and performed at the Opera Theatre in Montecarlo in 1961. Unlike *La panchina*, this opera work was successful.

well as the music, are simple and straight, as Berio admitted in *Intervista sulla musica*:

Musicalmente *Allez-Hop* non presenta alcun problema. Anche il rapporto musica-azione scenica è molto chiaro. Ma in tutte le realizzazioni – alcune delle quali assai pregevoli – c'è sempre stata la tendenza a complicare l'azione e a calcare e sovraccaricare le situazioni mentre invece la musica richiede un teatro diretto e immediato, fatto di gesti brechtianamente intesi, senza ridondanza e con una certa purezza di immagini. (1981:125)

After almost two decades, in the 1970s, Berio and Calvino worked together again in *La vera storia* (1977-1978) and *Un re in ascolto* (1978-1983), two works in which the narrative element is richer. This time the project was wider and more ambitious. However, although the collaboration was always friendly, it was neither simple nor easy, because Berio “come [...] in tutti i suoi rapporti coi librettisti, è stato sempre irritato dalla presenza di significati lessicali o storie che gli disturbavano il forsennato connubio coi suoni allo stato puro” (Umberto Eco, in De Benedictis, 2012:9).⁵ Indeed, Berio was more inclined to dismantling realism and conventional narrative techniques, while Calvino was interested in re-constructing plots as much as dismantling them, as his *contes philosophiques* and *Il castello dei destini incrociati* or *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* show. This is how the work progressed, in Calvino's own words:

Berio ha fissato una serie di momenti chiave, ognuno con una struttura drammatica e musicale ben precisa, e per ognuno di questi momenti mi ha chiesto delle parole che, senza precisare troppo l'azione, diano la sostanza della

⁵ This is how Calvino comments on his contribution to the first part of *La vera storia*: “I versi della Vera storia? [...] Versificavo pezzo a pezzo, secondo le esigenze che Berio mi chiedeva volta per volta, ma il disegno generale dell'opera lo sapeva solo lui e io non l'ho mai capito” (Calvino, 2000:1513).

comunicazione lirica. [...] come archetipo di libretto d'opera siamo partiti tenendo presente il *Trovatore*, ma questo schema di struttura drammatica, spogliato di tutto il suo armamentario romantico, traspare solo in filigrana come rapporto fra quattro ruoli fondamentali: il baritono e il tenore come fratelli-nemici che si contendono l'amore d'una donna, Leonora, mentre il contralto, Ada, è una figura materna che prende su di sé il dolore di tutti.” (1982:30)

The passage already summarizes the plot, which is modelled on Giuseppe Verdi's *Trovatore*. The title itself echoes the beginning of *Trovatore*: “la vera storia di [...] Garzia”. For Calvino and Berio, Verdi's opera is an archetype to disrupt: “Ma il momento decisivo è stato [...] l'individuare l'esatta posizione della *Vera Storia* rispetto all'«archetipo» opera lirica, posizione che non è di ribaltamento polemico o attualizzante or parodico, ma una sorta di sublimazione «concettuale» o più ancora «analitica»” (Calvino, 1982:31). This sublimation is achieved through contamination: musical references from *Trovatore* coexist with other influences, such as Brechtian *Sprechgesang*, jazz and Wagner.

From a musical point of view, the most interesting aspect of *La vera storia* is its double structure: it is divided into two parts, quite different one from the other, yet very closely related. While the first keeps a narrative and theatrical form, the latter is a further development or rather re-telling of the first: “un rimontaggio, libero e quasi privo di nessi causali, della prima [parte], insomma una *Twice-Told Tale*, per dirla alla Hawthorne” (Arato, 2007:95). As Berio clarifies in his lectures at Harvard:

“La Prima Parte si manifesta con le immagini e la gestualità di un racconto popolare, la Seconda Parte sembra non raccontare più nulla: *pensa* la Prima Parte. Nella Prima ci sono protagonisti vocali, nella Seconda c'è una collettività vocale. La Prima Parte è concreta e la Seconda è sognata. La Prima non ignora la scena operistica, la Seconda la respinge. La Prima Parte è

«orizzontale», estiva e all'aria aperta, la Seconda è «verticale», invernale, notturna e in città. La Seconda Parte diventa un'oscura parodia della Prima.” (2006:88-89)

It is striking how Berio specifies that the second part is associated to the city, whereas the first has an outdoor ‘flavour’. It is indeed evident that the events in the first part take place outdoors, nevertheless it is an urban environment: the characters (protagonists, storytellers, crowds, and guards) are all city dwellers who never leave streets, squares, and other city buildings such as the palace and the prison. The very first scene takes place in a square whose light and classical solemnity recalls De Chirico’s paintings: “La piazza vuota nel sole accecante di mezzogiorno: in fondo, un solenne edificio bianco che pare carico di storia” (2004:691), and this sets up the space in which the action proceeds. Moreover, the dramatic action is essentially a political action because it involves the entire *polis*: its citizens and its rulers. The two groups alternate: the former periodically bursts in unsuccessful rebellions against tyranny, the latter use violence to keep their power. It is a primarily urban dynamics; indeed it reflects Italy's social and political situation of the time: “*La vera storia* è figlia del proprio tempo, perché registra il circolo vizioso di ribellione e repressione nell'Italia degli anni Settanta” (Arato, 2007:93). A menacing power hovers over the many carnival feasts which shake the city periodically. Political terror mingles with popular hopes and actions for freedom:

CORO: Dentro di noi
L'offesa il rancore la rabbia
Adesso tutto è fuori
La speranza l'attesa
Ciò che noi siamo è fuori
Sarà la vera festa
Il fuori è il nostro spazio
(Calvino, 2004:702-703)

It is worth noting that freedom and hope coincide with possessing a space: “Il fuori è il *nostro* spazio”, “Il fuori è il *nostro* fuori” and opposition to the political violence is not only mental but primarily physical: “Resistete alla forza / Sbarrate piazze e strade” (2004:703). Evidently many examples of such resistance can be found in history, but this becomes apparent in cities whose spaces are not easily accessible to people, since some categories (women, the disabled, minorities, social subordinates etc.) are not allowed. South African cities, together with many others, offer examples of spaces which are still not owned, because they are physically shunned by people. In a city like this, power too, especially tyrannical power, feels unsafe: “IVO: Ho in mio potere una città ma ogni potere vive nel sospetto” (2004:698).

The third important work by Calvino and Berio is *Un re in ascolto*. Since at the basis of the opera is a careful analysis of the act of listening⁶, Calvino invented the story of a king who tries to listen (or spy) every kind of noise coming from his palace, his courtesans, and his people. Berio agreed on the idea but heavily intervened in the text so that the final libretto can be said to be the product of Berio’s hands using Calvino’s words. He transposed the initial story into a play-within-the-play context: the king is an impresario, surrounded by actors, singers, and other theatre workers. They assist him while, debilitated by a disease, he dies dreaming of a wonderful future for his theatre. The work openly draws on Shakespeare: the king/manager's name is Prospero, and one of his actors is Friday (a modern version of Caliban, drawn on Defoe).

From a musical point of view, Massimo Mila noticed that *Un re in ascolto* is organic and coherent, notwithstanding its fragmentary structure. However, it is far from any traditional opera patterns or from any idea of bel canto. All symphonicism is fragmentary and unpredictable, but music and words share a common ‘zyklisches Wiederkehr’ (Berio in Restagno, 1995:111), with verbal and musical

⁶ This opera was born out of a dictionary entry: Calvino loved Barthes and Havas's entry for the word ‘ascolto’ in the *Enciclopedia Einaudi* (1977), as did Berio. He particularly liked the three levels of listening that the linguist pinpointed: listening to tracks and hints (typical of animals), listening to decipher and anticipate (human beings at their first evolutionary state), and listening for social purposes.

leit motifs periodically emerging. The opera, Mila noticed, is dominated by vocality and the listener is surprised by the naturalness of the singing: contiguous notes follow one another, especially in Prospero's baritone arie. His pieces are "un declamato melodico flessuoso che ha il peso e la stanchezza della riflessione" (Cosso in Restagno, 1995:124).

Calvino's original idea of a political-sentimental *pièce* about power is not completely accepted by Berio: the composer limits the story to the world of drama. The text taken here into consideration for analysis is the original one, thus summarized by Calvino: "Il re, per trovare la donna che aveva sentito cantare nel primo atto, invita al palazzo musicisti e cantori e cantatrici e darà un premio alla voce più bella. Così spera di ritrovarla, ma non sa che una voce che canta davanti al re non può essere la voce del desiderio che lui ha sentito. [...] Poi tutto dovrebbe finire con una congiura di palazzo e una rivoluzione popolare" (2000:1481). Calvino's text starts with a beautiful parallelism between the palace, where the king lives, and the ear:

Padiglioni volute timpani chiocciole labirinti: il palazzo è
l'orecchio del re.
Qui i muri hanno orecchi.
Qui tutti i muri messi insieme formano un enorme
orecchio.

Tendaggi porte segrete spiragli cunicoli trabocchetti: il
palazzo del re è fatto per nascondersi e spiare.

Il re non ha bisogno d'orecchi. Il re ascolta con gli
orecchi altrui.
(2004:731)

Playing with idiomatic expressions ("Qui i muri hanno orecchi") and words which can be referred both to architecture and the physical structure of an ear ("padiglioni, timpani, chiocciole, labirinti"), the writer literally makes a metaphor concrete: "il palazzo è l'orecchio del re". Farther on, the metaphoric palace and the concrete ear expand into a city: "la città-conchiglia" (2004:738). Although the king spies

on the city, he cannot understand it and feels estranged: “Il re s’affaccia al balcone; guarda i tetti; cerca di riconoscere le vie; non si ritrova” (ibid.). In Ivan Vladislavić’s *Double Negative*, the photographer, looking down on the city from a hill, feels the same difficulty in understanding Johannesburg:

‘You think it would simplify things, looking down from up here,’ he went on, ‘but it has the opposite effect on me. If I try to imagine the lives going on in all these houses, the domestic dramas, the family sagas, it seems impossibly complicated. How could you ever do justice to something so rich in detail? You couldn’t do it in a novel, let alone a photograph. (2010:45)

Understanding a city from the outside seems an impossible task for both the photographer and the king.

This very purpose – to help understanding a city – is at the basis of *Rumori da monumenti* (2007), a composition by Lucia Ronchetti, on texts by Ivan Vladislavić. The work was presented as final outcome of a stay in Johannesburg made by the composer in 2008, inside the project ‘*Into...*’. Such project was sponsored by Ensemble Modern of Frankfurt and Siemens Arts Program, in collaboration with the Goethe-Institut, as an attempt to grasp the essence of a city by music⁷. “*Rumori da monumenti*” distances itself from Ronchetti’s previous production in its focus on urbanism⁸. However, the fact that she had not tackled such a topic in her other works is not surprising, since the main characteristic in her career and production seem to be heterogeneity of inspiration, fuelled and sustained by her travels. Born in 1963, she studied in Rome, then she specialized in Paris.

⁷ The composition was first performed on 6th March 2009, at the Konzerthaus, Berlin, by the Ensemble Modern conducted by Sian Edwards. Lucia Ronchetti was the only Italian composer taking part in the project and she spent a month in Johannesburg.

⁸ She had already composed a piece on Rome, but she had focused on the sound of its doors: “I recently wrote a piece for German radio (Deutschlandradio Kultur), *Il Castello di Atlante*. It is a portrait of Rome through the sound of its doors: doors which vary according to age, size and material, each one of them unique with their own creaks and squeaks. The work was about memories of the past” (Ronchetti, *Interview 1*).

After that, numerous other scholarships and periods of study, in Stuttgart, New Haven, New York and Berlin. In her university dissertation about Bruno Maderna – a close friend of Luciano Berio – Ronchetti developed an interest in electro-acoustic media, a field in which she specialized at IRCAM, in Paris. In the last few years, Lucia Ronchetti has been working on the compositional treatment of the voice (an interest she shares, again, with Berio), collaborating intensively with the Neue Vocalsolisten of Stuttgart, one of the foremost European ensembles specialized in contemporary vocal music. In Stuttgart she met Ivan Vladislavić. Their first collaboration was a piece for musical theatre exploring the concept of otherness: *SchlemihlBendel*, in 2000, which is an adaptation of *Peter Schlemihl* by Adelbert von Chamisso.

In *SchlemihlBendel*, Vladislavić continues exploiting the technique of fragmentation which contributed to the success of *Portrait with Keys*, but he gives it a sort of dialogic form. As the title suggests, and as the visual outline of the libretto emphasises (italics and standard script), the text consists in alternating two speaking voices: Schlemihl and Bendel. The former corresponds to Chamisso's protagonist, while the latter keeps only the name of Schlemihl's servant, since in the libretto he is a metal scrap collector living in the streets of Johannesburg:

This is the story of Peter Schlemihl, a young man with ambitions and no prospects, who struck a foolish bargain and ruined his life – only to strike a better bargain and recover its true purpose. He was a European and he lived, in the way that people live in stories, at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

This is the story of Josiah Bendel, a congenital servant with a sense of history, who collected scrap metal in the streets of Johannesburg. He was an old man and an African, and he lived at the close of the twentieth century.

The two men are juxtaposed as to highlight their differences – young/old, European/African, 19th/20th century – but also to show their similarities: they are both outsiders, socially excluded and they share a common destiny (chosen or not) of servitude.

Of Schlemihl's story, only his wanderings around the globe, thanks to his magical seven-league boots, are taken into account. Such wanderings are paralleled by Bendel's wanderings in search of metal scraps. Vladislavić adds one more walking figure to his literary catalogue, but this time there is a musical quality in his walks: "I am a collector of noise and iron. I love the sound of rusted chains, creaking bedsteads, empty drums. The batwing bones of umbrellas splintering underfoot. Bars. Any resounding thing that declares my persistence in the world. Above all: bells." (Vladislavić, 2000). When Bendel moves, a whole range of different clatter, jingling and rattling emerges from his trolley "filched from Pick 'n Pay" (ibid.). In the end, music, city and writing join together in the beautiful final image in the libretto: the loose typewriters keys Bendel found one day in the streets, collect themselves and start working. It becomes alive and it metamorphoses into a creature which speaks with a musical rhythm. However, it is not the production of music which is here emphasised, but its connection to the production of words: words that are flimsy and inconsistent. They are "like a shadow" (ibid.). This could be Vladislavić's interpretation of Chamisso's classic: Peter Schlemihl lost his words to narrate the world, but there is the African Bendel who picked them up and put them into music.

Lucia Ronchetti's collaboration with Vladislavić about city description continued in *Rumori da monumenti*. This composition sprung out of Ronchetti's involvement in the 'Into....' project, in which she explores sub-urbanity. In two interviews published on the website of the 'Into...' project, it is possible to outline the process which led to the composition. For Ronchetti, the knowledge of the city is prior to the arrival in the city itself and it is built on the reading of Vladislavić's works, but she also used a wider variety of readings, related to literature as well as music and arts.

In *Interview 1* she highlights some concepts that feature in the composition: mythology, utopia-distopia, exploration, space. The utopian-distopian perspective plays a leading role, since she admits

her intent is “to develop a fictional dialogue on the utopia and dystopia of Johannesburg”. Therefore, the notion of mythology (in the form of memory), of exploration (in the form of experience) and the idea of space make up the theoretical framework which contains a composition for solo recorded voice and ensemble using fragments from Ivan Vladislavić’s *Portrait with Keys*. The voice will be realized by a South African actor under the direction of Minky Schlesinger. In this way, a South African voice will be included, reading an English text full of topographic names, specific words of Johannesburg, showing the unicity of linguistic local sounds.” In the score I will certainly integrate some results of my acoustical inquiry in the formal *andamento* and also in sound texture, without, however, using concrete quotations or examples (Ronchetti, *Interview 2*).

Therefore, from the musical point of view, the composition aims at including as many different elements as possible in order to mirror the heterogeneity of the big African metropolis she has experienced personally, in the month she spent in the city.

The texts provided by Vladislavić are fragments from *Portrait with Keys*, re-arranged in a new order. The libretto is divided into eleven parts and a coda. The topics, as indicated by the author, are: 1-island, 2-prospecting, 3-boundaries, 4-city vs. township, 5-islanders, 6-objects, 7-water, 8-objects, 9-barriers, 10-metro, 11-on the plane, coda-shell. In the “Notes on second draft”, which Ronchetti kindly sent me, Vladislavić underlines the symmetry of the structure: “This version is more strictly symmetrical than the first one. The sections are grouped in pairs around the central section (#6). These pairs are linked thematically. If you imagine them listed one below the other, and then joined in pairs by a bracket or semicircular line, you would have a shell-like structure, made of layers around the central section”. The close-knit net of correspondences between fragments (pairs and internal sets) recalls Calvino’s careful designing in *Le città invisibili* and *Il castello dei destini incrociati*. Like careful and inventive architects, the two authors draw maps of their work, giving them a visual outline that coincides in both writers with the image of the shell.

Such a metaphor is the lyric climax of a narrative movement which started from “the nature and materiality of the city”, as Vladislavić

himself pinpointed in the “Notes”. With “nature” we must assume that natural elements, water in particular, are to be included in the description but they not constitute the real nature, or inner quality of Johannesburg. Indeed, it will be soon apparent that water is not abundant at all and that the green areas in the city are man-made, while the wild veld around the city still keeps marks of the mining exploitation. The inner quality or the true nature of the city, therefore, lies more in the human will and action, which intervened in a land whose wealth was hidden underground and had to be dug up with labour. That is the reason why modern Johannesburgers are still “islanders” and “prospectors”: with these past figures, they share autonomy and a certain practice with materials. The “materiality” of life is reproduced in Part 6 in a long list of objects which look like a pile of rubbish. Among these poor objects, there is one single human being: “a black woman”. Rubbish is typical of cities and tells a lot about the social and economic structure of a city, as Calvino also highlighted in *La poubelle agrée* (1977). Here it is associated to the subordinates: black people and women. The reference to the victims of discrimination is also stressed in Part 4, where “the white city” and “the township” are contrasted through the difference of materials: “steel and glass” on the one hand, “cardboard and hardboard” on the other. Without spending a word on social issues and economic reports, Vladislavić manages to write a social critique as impressive as a pamphlet, on the consequences of apartheid and the new challenges of modern democratic South Africa. The materials and the list of objects, together with the human figure are powerful in showing the dystopian element that Ronchetti saw about Johannesburg. Calvino used rubbish as a metonymy of human life; likewise, Vladislavić uses materiality – discarded pieces of materials – as a metonymic strategy, which allows him to keep his impartiality as a narrator, but to convey his sense of dismay as an onlooker.

For Ronchetti and Berio the human voice has been a major source of study, for its musical as well as semantic characteristics; for Calvino and Vladislavić musicality has played a key role in their prose, in terms of rhetoric as well as theme. What propelled and favoured their meeting was a common concern about human beings, especially their contemporaries. There is in both authors, though with

different foregrounding, the same attention and curiosity about their times and the stage of social evolution they are witnessing. Both Calvino and Vladislavić chose to put people at the centre of their works for music, investigating topics such as anonymity, alienation, uprootedness, tyranny and exploitation. They described how people mould and are moulded by the environment they live in, and by the economical, social, ideological forces that interweave in human society. Their activism could be defined ‘political’ in the sense that involves wondering/wandering about the *polis*, intended as a primordial community of human beings. The very theme of noise, which is the *fil rouge* of their works, is strictly linked to the *polis* because noise could not exist without people: firstly, because they produce most of urban noise; secondly, because noise could not exist without an ear which detects it and a mouth which calls it so. The metaphor of the shell, on which Calvino’s and Vladislavić’s views converge, coagulates all these themes, and joins the human with the natural, the visual with the auditory. By linking water, sound and beauty, the shell summarizes human life but also city life. Finally, the shell symbolizes the poetical experience, i.e. an ever-negotiated balance between form and content, whose purpose is to ‘resound’ as much as ‘narrate’ our times.

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