

Michael Jarrell's « Galileo », prolegomena for a creation

On January 25th 2006, a new work enriched the opera repertory: one could discover Michael Jarrell's *Galileo*; adapted from Bertolt Brecht's *the life of Galileo*.

One of the questions that arise in this situation could be formulated as follows: how to make present an object which will be born, so to speak, at the end of the didactic process of presentation? Or, in the tread of Thévenin (1992, p. 133): how is *Galileo* going to clear “an access to his public being”?

The experiment carried owing to this creation is based on methods of transmission of the characteristic culture of musical listening as an activity of reception. It comes within a historico- cultural analysis of transmission processes of cultural artefacts (in this case an opera).

This type of analysis is based on the thesis that musical listening implies a work of “active reception” of the work, which can be equipped through situations of teaching/learning in order to develop a certain level of expertness among potential listeners of the work. A process of “didactic of listening” covers several problems of which we will underline in particular:

- The transposition of knowledge: by analysis, one tries to determine the way in which the erudite production (that of the composer Michael Jarrell) can be transposed and made available to a very mixed group.
- The didactic environment: it is a question of exploring where space, temporal, institutional constraints, and others, which are typical of formal environments education, can be mobilized to support trainings;
- Finally, the perspective in which this experiment proceeded

The training device we present is based on the historico-cultural approach founded by works of the Russian psychologist L.S. Vygotski (in particular 1925/2005 and 1934/1997).

The fundamental thesis of the historico-cultural approach is that teaching is a process of cultural transmission which generates the development of mental capacities of students.

Didactic practices of listening of works appear thus as specific activities of transmission of the cultural inheritance, but also as processes leading to the development of learners. The central assumption of the approach is that the familiarisation with the style and the treatment of typical musical parameters of Jarrell's work constitute a specific aesthetic experience.

1. From the erudite production to listening practices: a didactic work of transposition

From this musical Galileo, only two scores could testify:

- The score song-piano, already available for interpreters since the summer 2005 and
- A provisional version of the leader intended for the conductor (according to Lemoine).

Questioned on the possible relation between former works and this very new opera, Jarrell says to have referred two or three times to “...remote shades...” in Galileo.

The composer also mentions *Denn dasselbe ist erkennen und sein*, for six soloist voices and instrumental ensemble.

On the basis of this relation, an examination of the vocal treatment of these two works has been thus imagined:

- First by recording extracts of *Denn dasselbe ist erkennen und sein* and “...remote shades...” followed by these two works in entirety (cf. illustration 1).
- Then by outlining diversified activities enabling to familiarize oneself with Jarrell’s style in these two works

A sound workshop production of the type “to do like Jarrell” closes the series of activities with a task of production that enables learners to mobilize worked stylistic characteristics.

Illustration 1

Synopsis of the joint CD

A. *Denn dasselbe ist erkennen und sein (...because the thought and the being are the same thing...)* for 6 voices and the instrumental ensemble.

- ❖ 1st extract: - from 8:45 to 10:16, time 144 to 157: “plane” voices, “horizontal” polyphony.
- ❖ 2nd extract: - 5:46 to 6:55, time 81 to 106: often perched on a top C, the “plane” soprano above other voices...
- ❖ 3rd extract: -from 4:41 to 5:35, time 58 to 77 : mix sung and spoken voices
- ❖ 4th extract- from 7:50 to 8:41, time 117 to 142 –dramatization of the voice by various effects (lyric genre)
- ❖ Track 5: *Denn dasselbe ist erkennen und sein (...because the thought and the being are the same thing...)* in entirety.

B. “...remote shades...” for soprano and full orchestra.

- Track 6: beginning, from 0:00 to 1:39, time 1 to 19; solo and orchestra, on the melodrama mode
- Track 7, from: 5:48 to 6:31, time 80 to 95; the orchestra’s “answer” following the word “TENE BRE”
- Track 8, from 2:33 to 3:31, time 31 to 42; voice in deep register, carried and surrounded by the orchestra
- Track 9, from 4:30 to 5:16, time 58 to 70; grandiloquence and theatricalness, on the bel canto mode
- Track 10: “.....remote shades...” in entirety

Illustration 2

Comparison activity of musical extracts

Denn dasselbe ist erkennen und sein (...because the thought and the being are the same thing...), for 6 voices and instrumental ensemble.

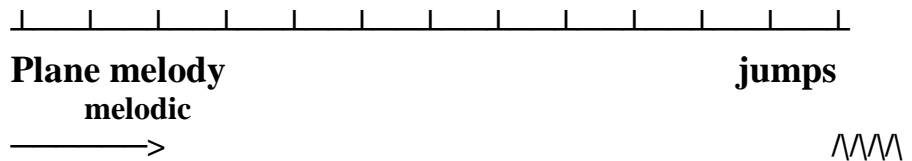
First activity: comparison of four extracts. Students receive the following quiz and answer it; first, they try alone to find out answers, then they confront them with that of another and they discuss by small group of two or three; before listening again the four extracts and confront a second time their answers

Illustration 3

QUIZ ON *Denn dasselbe ist erkennen und sein (...because the thought and the being are the same thing...)*, of Michael Jarrell, for 6 voices and Instrumental ensemble. Listening of four extracts (tracks 1 to 4 of the CD)

- a. One of these four extracts separates clearly voices: which one of the voices speaks while the others sing?

- b. Put at least two of extracts on a scale at the end of which would appear: “plane melody”, and at the other end: “very mobile melody- with serrated jumps”. Which of the four extracts will you choose to place them on this scale?



- c. Knowing that the piece is written for 6 voices, in which of these four extracts one most clearly hears various vocal registers represented (soprano, mezzo, viola, tenor, baritone and bass)?

- d. In which extracts can one perceive silences?

ANSWERS TO THE QUIZ

- a. The 3rd extract
- b. The first extract would rather be in the side of plane melodies, all of the left of the cursor; the second extract rather in the medium, owing to the fact that the soprano voice is relatively horizontal and the other more mobile voices; idem for the third extract, but owing to the fact that the spoken voice of the beginning introduces a kind of horizontality into vocal layers; the fourth extract would be rather at the right end of the cursor.
- c. Undoubtedly it is the first extract, because of the shifted aspect of interventions.
- d. There is a perceptible breathing in extract 4 and partial silences in extract 2 (suddenly almost all instruments and voices are quiet).

Illustration 4

Third activity : from melodrama to bel canto

“...of remote shades...”

Listening of tracks 6, 7, 8 and 9 of the CD

Michael Jarrell says to have referred two or three times to “... remote shades...” in Galileo.

This is what he says about his vocal writing at that moment of his work (it is a work created fifteen years back now, thus in 1990) : “ until then, I employed much the voice, but I had a tendency to “break” it. Whereas there, I wanted people to understand well the text in old Italian (mixture of Latin and popular Italian). That preoccupation of clearness is the reason why some people have heard this piece as a return to bel canto”.

Knowing that:

- Melodrama is a sort of narration where spoken voice and instruments are complementary (the one ensuring the story and the other the atmosphere around that story and of its peripeteia),
- The bel canto is on the contrary a writing mode that emphasizes possibilities of the virtuoso voice of singers and professional singers of opera, which of these four extracts appears to you most representative of melodrama and which the nearest to bel canto?
Perhaps, two listening are necessary to be able to answer ...

Answer: the first extract (track 6) is certainly the closest to melodrama and the fourth (track 9) the most comparable with bel canto.

Illustration5. Proposal of workshop

Proposal of workshop

Produce in small groups of 4 or 5 students a small melodrama, from an extract of text (tragedy, novel...).

Listen to extract 2 before "...of remote shades..." (Track 7) and take as a starting point the search for atmosphere such as one can hear it accomplished by Jarrell. It occurs a kind of echo to the "ténèbres" evoked by the voice...

Note: to be able to seek sound atmospheres, it would be judicious that students have several types of instruments, in particular instruments which resound (marimba, vibraphone...) and others where it is permissible to prolong a sound (winds, strings, skins rubbed with a brush). This in more of percussive instruments.

One can introduce the workshop by:

- Superimposing all participating instruments of each group on a held note : *strong* and *piano*, to realize how "it sounds" in tutti (percussion instruments renew the attack),
- Making follow one another instruments on a close or very distant notes in deep or acute registers, the whole intersected with unspecified sounds of percussions,
- Introducing silences into the three cases of figures described above.

2. Objects derived from Galileo:

a) *Cutting and differentiation within a work*

If *Galileo* cannot be a priori presented, other vocal pieces of Jarrell give the opportunity to seize musical objects which play the part of avatars here.

A work of development which has as precondition a gesture of the teacher, that to guide the learner's attention (in this case, by choosing sound extracts according to a logic of differentiation, by introducing categories of reference to name differences noticed with listening...) and to direct essential dimensions of the taught object: a process that Schneuwly (2002, p. 23) names the double *semiotics*.

b) *Production of "false Jarrell"*

c) *First approach of a score of the composer of Galileo, Denn dasselbe ist erkennen und sein, then, an approach of three pages of the leader of Galileo.*

By graphic comparison, the examination of some selected pages of Jarrell's scores enables students to objectivize some of the conclusions at which they had arrived by listening. That concern:

- The variety of genres and vocal styles of reference within the same work;
- The regular recourse by Jarrell, to "horizontalty" (a *recto tone melody*, a superimposition of standards with various voices and notes...);
- The regular recourse also to broken melody lines which contrast completely with the preceding item;
- The frequent superimposition of extreme registers (over acute/ very deep);
- The presence of many short "punctuations", of percussive type, in some vocal interventions;
- The very large range of intensities (*fff/ppp*);
- Frequent variations of tempi and the occasional recourse to very slow tempi (48 the black one), which gives an impression of " slow motion";
- The omnipresent rhythmic complexity.

3. The contribution of the teaching programme of the opera

a) The teaching file

Owing to the fact that it is the teaching programme of the Grand Theatre of Geneva which organizes the arrival of classes in its centre, the mode of reception and teaching tools suggested are institutionalized.

- A teaching file is placed at the disposal of teachers, in which the Grand Theatre wishes that it include necessarily three aspects:
 - A summary of the booklet,
 - A presentation of characters,
 - A musical part presenting either extracts of the work, or examples drawn from other works of the composer.
- A presentation of this file brings together all concerned teachers, which enables to raise questions relatively to the suggested approach.

b) *The production workshop*

4. Postures of musical listening as a result of a joint construction

Our study enables to underline that the construction of musical listening as a teaching object passes by a mutual transformation of cultural objects (which are “transformed” when they enter the didactic framework) and teaching practices (which must be adapted to the characteristics of the work and/or of the composer’s style).

As far as the didactic environment is concerned, the presented device shows the interest to resort to a rich and varied environment but, especially, in which the objects and activities are selected according to the contents to teach (stylistic features, musical parameters,). The central role of the teacher is precisely to choose these contents according to the initial capacities of learners, in order to confront them with situations which enable them to develop their skills and knowledge.

This learning activity is spread through a great diversity of roles and functions (listening, observation, critics, production, communication) of which each one enables to reach a particular point of view of the work and/or teaching object.

5. At the end of a joint construction

Analysis of listening and scores as well as workshops productions attest an appropriation, by students, of stylistics components of *Galileo*. Exchanges at the time of works of groups have been so rich that the majority of clarified characteristic emerged without another form of intervention of the teacher, that cutting in the score and recordings of former works.