

Charlotte Hug "Slipway to galaxies" for viola & voice and Son-Icons

The viola rings true. Charlotte Hug's intense interaction with Celtic myth also rings true. Swiftly and deftly her fingers and bow flit over the strings - not always but often very quickly - similarly ringing true. Yet Charlotte Hug is not a folklorist and does not quote from Celtic or Irish folk music.

Transition – that is the key concept, under which this music (and the Son-Icon, that particular type of graphite drawing which is inseparable from the music) may be conceived. Transition: of the Celtic voice techniques which Charlotte Hug studied and learned at their source, in the timbre of her own voice; of the exploration and inspiration of old myths within abstract art. For she is not simply a story-teller and has no wish to be. As intangible as the associations that arise, spring forth and flow on hearing her music, so the end result of her music is heard and experienced as independent and entirely detached from any kind of external musical connotations and context.

Just as for us the Celtic myths, or images of an old, sometimes flooded, sometimes dry overgrown harbour, or the keening of other (foreign) worlds (such things, which in their cultural-historical momentousness we can only grasp and understand in a fragmentary fashion, if at all) so the sounds made by Charlotte Hug appear as something 'other', the style of singing and the myths as if emerging from foreign worlds, aesthetically, temporally, culturally. In short, this is the 21st-century art of a viola player and vocalist using improvisation, composition and drawing. Such is the transformation from centuries-old myths and folk art to artificial (art)music of the here and now, not only researching and expanding the developmental possibilities of sound, but also reflecting and referencing the sound and its history.

Charlotte Hug has returned again and again to sound research and has developed new playing techniques such as the soft bow and the wet bow for her viola. She has learned various voice techniques and, through a combination and modification of these, she has found her own unique voice. She has experimented with Live-Electronic and carried these experiences over into pure acoustic playing. She is seeking to reveal the hidden qualities of basic sound. These are ostensibly simply technical details. But they are driven by musical ideas. When making music, the unusual locations, such as an abandoned harbour, an old damp prison, or the Rhône glacier, serve as catalysts, or occasionally furnish concrete changes, such as the damp or the cold. Close listening is, for her as a musician, a process of musical thinking, in which the detail is played and responded to. But above all it is the changes which fascinate Charlotte Hug, whether in nature or in culture, in locations, in history or in art, in music, as in her drawings. Her music changes constantly. She is like a glancing river, changing her colour or her intensity, not always dramatically, often by nuances. Then again, she creates sharp contrasts of sound, moves back and forth between extremes, with ebb and flow – between pure tone and sound: one hears perhaps a sound wrap or a continuous transition of compressed or tonally pure sounds, extending into a diffused, fragile rustling, often multiple, multi-vocal - even more so when her voice enters the work.

The occasional arco line is more effective than an intrusive foreign element - appearing in a fresh light, but again acoustically altered. A delicate memory of the 'old', which here becomes something new, something contemporary, and yet has not lost its link to tradition, evoking it in subtle ways.

Even the genesis of the music relies on change. It emerges in the changes of media used by Charlotte Hug: viola and voice on the one hand, graphite pencil and semi-transparent paper on the other. Up to now she has usually first improvised, then drawn while listening to recordings of her improvisations, and then has used these drawings (the Son-Icons, as they have been so aptly termed) as flexible graphic scores and as new stimuli for improvisation. Now she has changed the process of creating the Son-Icons. She has brought the music and graphic elements even closer together, by presenting her improvisation of viola and voice, while also improvising in her drawing. The transformation of sound into image takes place simultaneously, while the drawing - the visual picture as well as the haptic movement and gesture - simultaneously transforms, transmutes and alters the musical, even if in this case it is 'only' to inspire and continue the performance in question. Transformation, therefore, in the work of Charlotte Hug, signifies not a simple or clear-cut shift or transfer from one medium into another – or even the expressive visualisation of sounds. The media are much more tightly interlocked. Charlotte Hug develops the same artistic idea in each of the media. Drawing and music-making are each at the same time catalysts, each one the horizon of experience for the other artistic medium.

The pencil is to the draughtsman as the bow is to the musician, and can engender sound when it is drawn over the paper. Above all it is the fineness and intensity which, though changes in impression, edgings, changes in the surface,

but also the speed of drawing, all imbue the resulting graphic effect. Just as with the bow in playing. And when Charlotte Hug allows her as yet unfinished drawings to float over the abandoned harbour, new changes take place. The semi-transparent paper is diaphanous and yet firm; taut and yet fleeting as her music, which works its intense power from just such finely woven threads.

Changes and transitions from one medium to another give cause for reflection on the other medium. A change of perspective, an auditory-visual change, a change of medium, an extension of thinking, and sometimes also music and image thinking in parallel, each in the other medium. A continuation, in order to remain part of the flow.
Slipway: The shift from land to water...

Nina Polaschegg 2011,
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