

Sergej Newski

Overcoming Obstacles

The Russian composer Sergej Newski

Uncertainty and extreme situations have always posed a challenge to Sergej Newski. At the start of the nineties, when this Muscovite (born in 1972) went to Germany to study composition, he was leaving a country that was in an unstable situation, both socially and culturally, to find his way in another environment that previously he could only observe from outside: "The Russian tradition had collapsed, and the German one was something I had to check out and get a grip on. Sure, there were icons of modernity, but no 'fathers' one needed to 'kill off'. To that extent, the influence of the immediately preceding generation was not so significant. Much more decisive were exchanges with contemporaries who had already been born into a post-modern world." In Berlin, where – following a transitional period in Dresden – he took up studies with Friedrich Goldmann at the Universität der Künste in 1994, he found an ideal environment for this kind of creative discourse. "Here everything was questioned, there existed a downright aggressive kind of criticism that I found very stimulating."

In this climate, Newski managed to find a musical language that still defines his compositions today. At the centre of many of his pieces is the human voice. His preference for the most immediate of all ways of making sound resulted from the search for a subjective, archaic material, as the starting point for an entirely 'civilised' access to it – in the form of musical composition. "The voice", Newski recalls, "was the ideal way of finding my own sonic language. At the end of the nineties I started converting expressive vocal sounds into organised syntactical systems which were at odds with their expressivity, with the aim of finding a synthesis between subjective materials and constructive concepts." Bit by bit, Newski expanded the vocal material he was experimenting with, until it formed a systematically organised stock of sounds and noises – a vocabulary which then served as the basis of his compositional work. Newski first used this repertoire in the piece "Pesnya" (in English, 'song'), composed in 1999. "Pesnya" is a barely five-minute piece for solo voice, which Newski describes as "a nonverbal monologue, seeking intensely to communicate". The closeness to sound and the immediacy with which the interpreter engages with what has been composed is made particularly clear in this intimate piece. And this closeness is also fundamental to the way in which Sergej Newski's compositions are created. His works don't pursue broad formal designs: composition usually begins with just a single vocal sound, a gesture – a rather unimposing moment which is then continually reworked, recurring in constantly changing perspectives, and engaging in ever new connections.

"Fluss" ('Flow') is the title of a work for voice and ensemble written in 2005, in which Newski's principle of changing perspectives is made quite explicit. In this work too he investigates the reciprocal effects of a highly expressive material and a strictly through-composed form. As a basis for his piece, Newski uses texts by the American film-maker and author Harmony Korine, who became known in the mid-nineties for his screenplay for Larry

Clark's film "Kids". These texts are a collection of little dialogues, short stories or scenes. Here, dramatic things follow everyday ones, and intimate moments mingle with trivialities. This gives rise to a curious form of naturalness, where emotionality and distance are at one. Newski traces this relationship throughout his piece "Fluss". Here too, the extreme subjectivity of the vocal part is on the one hand relativised by its conversion into musical relationships, but on the other, it is given an exaggerated presence.

The peculiar treatment of the voice that Sergej Newski deploys in his compositions could, given its inarticulate, inaccessible phonetic aspect, easily be equated with autistic verbal utterances. Newski himself finds this comparison too facile. In his pieces, the supposedly 'autistic speaking' is actually more a means of getting hold of contrary musico-dramatic processes, as represented by the contrast between repressing and exuding: "In many of my pieces, there's a suggestion of overcoming an obstacle, of a physical struggle for communication." For Sergej Newski this corporeal factor, immediately inherent in a singer's actions, is also indispensable in writing for instruments, which appear as interposed, initially remote 'producers' of sound. And in many of his purely instrumental compositions, the relationship between physical actions and acoustic results has a decisive influence on a composition's dramaturgy. A piece for four instrumentalists from 2007 is called "Blindenalphabet" ('Braille Alphabet'). In this composition, Newski deals quite expressly with this kind of physicality. The 'blindness' implicit in the work's title is matched here by the way it is played. The instruments are not treated by the players as familiar 'musical equipment', but are approached in terms of tactile, cautious, sometimes even apprehensive physical contact.

The texts that Sergej Newski uses in his compositions play an important role in his music. His choices are frankly unconventional: passages from the mediaeval poet and scholar Thomas of Celano's biography of St. Francis sit alongside texts by Dante Alighieri, as well as contemporary authors like Michael Lentz, Gerd Peter Eigner and – as in the piece "Fluss" – Harmony Korine.

For the most part, it is the gloomier aspects of literature that attract Newski. If this often leads to him being saddled with the 'melancholy Russian' stereotype, he can cope with it: "What mainly concerns me is the need for a continuous narrative, and for self-contained musical syntax. Maybe that's a generational issue. For composers of the younger generation, abrupt 'switching' of sounds or structures has become important. But again, that's not an issue for me: I'm trying to put heterogeneous material into contexts that provide readily comprehensible listening."

In his vocal sextet "Was fliehen Hase und Igel" ('What Hares and Hedgehogs run from'), composed in 2004, Sergej Newski formulates his ideal of a closed, narrative music in exemplary fashion. The piece exactly follows a text by the writer and theatre director Einar Schleef, who died in 2001, but also exploits its potential for musical narrative. Whereas a text only has the option of representing a narrative sequence of events, music can establish synchronous strategies, allowing several processes to evolve simultaneously. But for Sergej Newski, the features of a narrative text – its dramatic continuity, and the organising factor of syntactic structures – are also crucial in a musical context. For him, composing is 'writing' in a quite literal sense: putting hand to paper. "If one writes down a structure, and one sees it as

written, then one's starting point is not just imagined sound, but also the written image. I think it is this adherence to continually writing things down that creates my need for a closed composition,"

Michael Rebhahn

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