

Mathis Nitschke
**Opera as political expression, the chant as utopia:
Happy Happy!**

A lecture at the 11th and 12th study days of the research group OPEFRA
at the invitation of Cécile Auzolle, University of Poitiers
at SACD, Paris, June 19th, 2015

on the creation of
HAPPY HAPPY
an operatic song-cycle with party
by Mathis Nitschke

Libretto developed by the composer, with excerpts from texts by Joseph von Eichendorf, Rainer Maria Rilke, Michel Houellebecq, Bruno Latour, Thomas Gray, Jean Giraudoux, Percy Shelley and others

for soprano and chorus, chamber orchestra, electronics
performed November 19th-22nd, 2014, National Opera Montpellier, Comédie

Commissioned by the Opéra National de Montpellier Languedoc-Roussillon
General Directeur Jean-Paul Scarpitta

Abstract: There is no alternative. The public debate is under the seal of fatalism. There is no other objective than that of universal restrictions. The economy, the climate, overpopulation – the next catastrophe lies in wait at every bend. Minute by minute, the modern media feed us bad news. We know we should act but we feel powerless. We reduce our sphere of activity. We cease asking for anything whatsoever. We retreat into our shells. The link that would constitute values other than economic ones is missing. What might we do?

In this lecture I outline the path from personal societal experiences over scrutinisations of arts and society to my artistic conclusions which led to the creation of the opera HAPPY HAPPY, a plea for opera being practised as political expression.

There is a private background story which forced the shape of my second opera HAPPY HAPPY in a certain direction. Up until my first opera JETZT, I was living and working in a mainly artistic surrounding, stimulated and inspired by conversations and collaborations with other musicians, composers and artists. Although I did have a certain interest in politics and society, my artistic work was based almost entirely on my poetic ideas.

Then I became a father and my surrounding changed to more 'normal' people, people with 'real' professions like lawyers, engineers, economists. Through my conversations with them I realized the vast dimension of economic tyranny. Economic concepts like efficiency or process-optimization had wormed their way profoundly into the non-economic personal and social areas of our lives, where they really shouldn't have any meaning or importance.

At the same time the financial crisis of 2008 and later started showing the powerlessness of our political systems against the economic systems. Politicians are forced to react without democratic mandate and defend themselves with the argument that there is no alternative. The individual voice seems redundant and superfluous. What can we do?

What can I do?

Before being a father I was mostly concerned with my own goals and wishes. That there was no common discourse aimed at common artistic positions never really bothered me because it was my intention anyway to be independent of this 'system'. I took a certain degree of pride in making my way without the usual help of grants, recommendations or competitions. This form of egoism I regarded as a form of liberal self-expression.

Today, egoism has become the ubiquitous force, the necessity to survive. In Capitalism, the fittest survives and as there is less economic value in the arts than in, say, corporate consulting, the artist will lose. Finding someone who would rent a flat to me and my family in a highly gentrified city like Munich was a humiliating experience. Of course no one rents his house to a freelance artist family if there are a hundred 'dinks' (double-income-no-kids) competing.

This painful experience made me completely rethink the question of relevance of the arts in our society. Far from having arrived at an answer it started an on-going process in which HAPPY HAPPY is a first manifestation. The questions I'm dealing with are basic: "What is art in our society?", "What is politics in our society?", "Can art be political?", "Is there something like political art?" and "What can or should this political art achieve?"

Why I actually question political art is because a lot of artworks I have seen with a political ambition fail in being artistically interesting, and vice versa. There seems to be a certain contradiction in politics and art.

Quite soon I came to the conclusion that I don't want to express any kind of political message straight out in words. I rather came back to that notion of the artist as seismograph. The artist as the one with a certain kind of antenna for social dissonances. The artist who is able to set a collective emotion in music, to compose a mirror to the feeling of living in our current society. My hope is that if the artwork succeeds as a mirror, the audience is able to identify with this emotion, reflect on it and maybe even do something about it.

To accomplish this I don't think it helps to be overly complex. I want to mirror this emotion to an audience (like my new peer group of 'normal people') instead of passing it on to music experts like my fellow composers or you fine scientists. And I do think that a healthy degree of naivety is necessary, naivety in the meaning of childlike direct response with no added layer of morality or theory. If the result smells only slightly like moral superiority, the audience won't identify and won't follow.

I started by collecting texts which touch this emotion from different angles. I had no hope of finding or creating the one text that expresses perfectly all my impressions. That's because I don't think it can even exist. We live in a fragmentary but somehow connected world; we have this fuzzy feeling that everything is somehow related to everything. There is not that one single problem we can solve with that one smart solution and then everything is fine. As soon as we smell the possibility of a solution we quickly realize the bitter aftertaste of new problems it creates. The sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour calls this a 'hairy object'. Take nuclear energy, for example. There used to be a time when we thought it would solve all our problems. Now we know that it created more problems than it solved. Today, we are immediately aware of all the bad side-effects of a pill which was originally conceived in optimism to cure our sickness.

We don't dive deep into subjects anymore, we don't read articles from beginning to end, we don't listen carefully, we let ourselves flow from one hyperlink to the next. Being under pressure and the aforementioned ubiquitous efficiency thinking might be one reason why we do so. Another, I think, a more profound reason might be distrust. As we immediately know that the one answer is not a full answer, that there is always another version of a news article, that we know there is not a single truth; we lose the will to dive into deep thought; we don't trust it. We prefer surfing the waves on the surface, an often exciting and fun ride.

As my intention is to offer a mirror I didn't even try to offer the one deep thought. I tried rather to create the impression of the first page of a newspaper. A lot of very different subjects are hinted at there and if one of them attracts your interest, you can read on about that particular subject later in the newspaper. On the first page you get an immediate, albeit blurry impression of what's going on, a rough impression of now. Sometimes it even goes a little deeper, in short commentaries or editorials, but mostly it offers bits and pieces of information which are connected by you, the reader, according to your background and preferences.

What attracted my interest were diverse sources from reality like the events of Occupy Wall Street and that little companion book of this time *Time for outrage!* by Stéphane Hessel, the Big Data enterprises by companies like Google and IBM or great sentences by great people from the past made meaningless through their abuse by the coaching and self-optimization industry.

I found dramatic pieces like *La Folle de Chaillet* (or *The Madwoman of Chaillet*) by Jean Giraudoux, *Tosca* by Puccini and art performances by Jonathan Meese. Central and longest scene is a Tribunal I have written based on motives from Carl-Henning Wijkmark, *The modern death*. Here the protagonist has to defend herself as to why she insists on living on after she crossed the line of profitability. In the society I portray here it is mandatory to die when one is costing the society more than one generates.

Other than insisting on her humanity, my protagonist really has no hard arguments to defend herself. In an economically driven society, artistic talents like singing have no value. Singing is not a product, although many currently try to justify the cost of music and singing as economically useful. This is a very wrong discussion. Singing is not a product. Singing is an activity, a habit which makes us human. Being touched by the voice of a singer makes us human. We as a humanist society should welcome the cost of music and singing as a means to define ourselves as humans.

This point of view – today it sometimes seems utopian – I expressed through poems from German and English Romanticism, but also through contemporary poetry by Michel Houellebecq. The idea that there should be an island possible in our society touches me dearly.

Theoretical reflections by Bruno Latour or Dick Raaijmakers complement this conflict.

Giving a name to my operatic song-cycle, though, was the principle of the party.

Regardless of what circumstances in which we live, which problems we face, which hurdles we have to overcome, we're supposed to be happy. There is no culture left to accept sadness or doubts. The next party is always around the corner, and if you don't feel like partying, well, do something about it. Go to the psychologist, take some pills, maybe even take drugs, but leave me alone with your problems. Let me party!

If there is one scene bringing it all together it is this short one, Number 13, which I conceived at the end of this collecting process:

*Je mange et mange. Et meurs.
De faim.*

I eat and eat and eat. And die. Of hunger.

While I'm zapping through those sources I am zapping through many types of music. I'm not even trying to be inventive as is expected in modern music. I take and recombine what's around me, I re-contextualize what people are listening to in hopes of mirroring them, maybe with a slight touch of *Verfremdungseffekt*. It's all there already, music is

always available, always on. And I take it all. Not as a post-modern theoretical statement, but as an expression of living practice.

The director, Urs Schönebaum, and I tried to realize our production as low-cost as possible. We wanted to be down to earth, approachable and human. Not superhuman or super-sophisticated like a lot of opera productions are. The cast is only one guest soprano, in our case Karen Vourc'h, and the house chorus. Some little solo lines are given to members of the chorus. The orchestra (also from the house) is small and transformed into a bigger sound by use of electronics. There is no set, only lights. Also no costumes – the singers perform in their usual concert outfit.

As I have tried to unfold, this 'operatic song-cycle with party' is about the struggles of feeling human in an anti-human society. To oversimplify my piece, one could say it is about a woman who just wants to sing but society doesn't allow her to do so.

As you probably know, the National Opera of Montpellier is in trouble. It's obvious – not only there – that society is less and less willing to pay for the arts, especially opera, which is regarded as expensive, old-fashioned and only for a small community of old bourgeois people. Yes, opera is not efficient. It's pretty much the opposite of efficient.

I took it as a necessity, a duty, to make this my subject and, of course, I hoped that the opera house would take it on to inform, debate and defend their positions and interests. I work a lot in straight German theatre and there it is common practice to be political, to inform and debate. There are public discussions and symposia, all on the side of their artistic work, to establish and re-assure theatre as places in society where one can reflect esthetically in society about society. I was prepared and made myself available to be part of discussions and to give lectures.

I especially hoped they would put on those events in places where the so-called non-public would come. Experience shows that my work is attractive to people who never went to the opera or if they went, were alienated or, even worse, bored. Convincing engineers or economists that singing is vital for our society was and continues to be my challenge.

Alas, the opera house did ... nothing. Nobody in the PR or administration department was even interested in learning more about what I intended with this piece. I'm not even talking about those aforementioned discussions; I'm talking about straight marketing. There wasn't even a poster in the streets.

On stage it was very different. Most singers of the chorus realized quite quickly what the piece was about and identified, pro and contra. Still, my music sounds horribly idiotic on piano alone, so hardly anybody understood the emotional impact this piece should have in the end. Only after the orchestra joined did the emotion become graspable, and that was also the point when at least some people in the administration woke up. Unfortunately, that was too late.

We had four shows with a maximum of 500 people on one evening, that's half the house. The other three shows were much less. Although that was disappointing, of course, the artistic process was very rewarding. The artists of the chorus and orchestra were very supportive and engaged in emotional discussions. I also felt support and sympathy backstage in the technical departments. As for the administration, I'm still not so sure.

Opera as an institution has departed completely from political discourse. People regard opera as sophisticated entertainment. Opera is not important in a socio-political commitment. This was never really different and probably never will profoundly change. But shouldn't we at least try to change?

Contemporary productions are commissioned from time to time. Not because people think we really need contemporary opera to express our current times in music. It is rather made to justify their funds. And it's kind of fancy and exotic. But it's not an urge, a need. One does it because it is good practice and tasteful to do it. I don't think that I'm wrong in thinking that most people in the opera world could well live without us composers and stick to their old 'hits'. The administration of those pieces is easy and completely predictable.

What a chance is being lost here! We live in a situation in which pop music and film have lost their potential for identification. The economization process took over those

industries and generates products for target groups. Nobody really wants to be a target. Audiences still consume those products but they don't identify with them anymore. If we'd show them alternatives – and modern opera can be a strong alternative –, they would appreciate it. That, at least, is my experience of my two productions.

We should remind ourselves that opera houses are located directly in the city center. They should open themselves up to become centers of music, open to everybody and any genre. There should be concerts in the foyers, nightclubs in the basements, a wide variety of contemporary productions on stage. Also the style of singing should not be restricted. Why shouldn't we make an opera production with a famous pop singer? The use of microphones and amplification is also really nothing special nowadays. Bring it on! And finally, composers should stop worrying about the most minute details in the orchestra pit and instead create attractive and intelligent spectacles with singing people on stage.

That's my dream, my utopia of a future opera house: a house right in the centre of society where people can reflect musically in society about society. Singing as an artificial means of expression compared to the more and more dogmatic naturalism in spoken theatre and film has greater potential to think up ideas, dreams, utopias and alternatives.

There we have it: an alternative.