

MICHAEL MANTLER

EDITIONS

VOLUME TWO

VOICES
AND WORDS

INTRODUCTION

— BY RICHARD WILLIAMS

“Singing Mike Mantler’s music demands paying attention to every note,” Robert Wyatt says, thinking back 45 years to their first collaboration. “It is so worth it: his pieces are not just innovative. They are living, breathing things, with their own organic logic, based on the texts he’s working with.”

Michael Mantler had been writing instrumental pieces for large and small ensembles – notably the Jazz Composer’s Orchestra – for ten years when he set about tackling the challenge represented by songs and singers, using voices and lyrics to extend the emotional range of the music he had been making with instruments alone. Initially feeling unsuited to becoming his own lyricist, he looked elsewhere for the words that would match and articulate the feelings he wanted to convey. He knew what he was searching for. “It is very important to me that the words are abstractions of thought and feelings, rather than literal expressions of someone’s everyday experiences,” he has said. “I feel very strongly about incorporating a certain kind of ambiguity in order to give the listener as much latitude of interpretation as possible.”

Unsurprisingly, given those parameters, the writer whose words provided his first inspiration was Samuel Beckett, the Irish novelist, playwright and poet who, from his adopted home in Paris, wrote in both English and French, sometimes translating his own work from one to the other. In 1973 Mantler

set words from Beckett’s novel *How It Is* (*Comment c’est*) to music in a recording titled *No Answer*, featuring the trumpeter Don Cherry, the singer Jack Bruce and the pianist Carla Bley. The album was released on Mantler’s own WATT imprint, its name also taken from a Beckett novel, and distributed by ECM Records (a relationship that continues to this day). Two years later Mantler released *The Hapless Child*, settings of stories by Edward Gorey voiced by Robert Wyatt. In 1976 Wyatt and another English singer, Kevin Coyne, delivered the words of Harold Pinter – a writer famously defined as much by his ellipses as by his words – on an album titled *Silence*.

So we come to *Many Have No Speech*, the first of three albums whose scores are reproduced in this second volume of Mantler’s works. In this 1987 recording Beckett is joined as librettist by two other 20th century European poets, Ernst Meister and Philippe Soupault, while Bruce and Wyatt are joined by a third singer, Marianne Faithfull, accompanied by the Danish Radio Concert Orchestra, with Mantler’s trumpet and the guitar of Rick Fenn providing instrumental solo voices.

Three languages are alternated – English, French and German – by the singers, all three native English speakers. In the early ’70s Mantler had originally begun his search for words suitable for setting by looking for poetry in English before finding work in French that appealed to him, along

with poetry in German, his own native tongue. The juxtaposition of the three languages reflects his own history – born and educated in Austria, a resident of the United States from 1962-1991, now living in Denmark and France.

The pieces from Beckett (1906-1989) are poetic fragments – “facing/the worst/until/it makes you laugh” – etched as if in stone, like splinters of feeling, sometimes mordant or sardonic but pulsing with humanity. Meister (1911-1979) lived in a German century full of death and darkness, his later work marked by his own experience of war: “Many/have no speech/Had I not/my fill of misery, I/would not/move my tongue.” Soupault (1897-1990) was associated with Dadaism and the early Surrealists in Paris in his twenties, and spent six months imprisoned in Tunis by the Vichy regime, an experience which may be reflected in his *Tant de temps* : “Time going by/time not going by/time you kill/time to count to ten/time you don’t have/time good or bad/time to be bored/time to dream/time of agony/time you waste...”

And what voices Mantler chose to deliver these lines: three of the most distinctive singers to emerge from the British rock scene of the 1960s, very different from each other but sharing the desire to experiment, to test themselves by pushing beyond the conventional, here embedded in or struggling to free themselves from the mass of the 41-piece Danish Radio Concert Orchestra. “The voices I like have a certain dramatic quality,” Mantler has said. “I want them to have character and to be naturally rough, somewhat unpolished, maybe even broken, with an expressive edge, yet musical. Voices like these usually come from jazz or popular music, and the only problem is to find someone sophisticated enough

to sing difficult music and identify with the equally difficult words.”

Jack Bruce came down from Glasgow to London in the early 1960s to play bass and bass guitar with Alexis Korner’s Blues Incorporated, the Graham Bond Organisation, John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers and Manfred Mann, before joining Eric Clapton and Ginger Baker in Cream, the first of rock’s supergroups, with which he also assumed the role of lead singer. After Cream broke up in 1968, having achieved worldwide success, Bruce made several well received solo albums, including *Harmony Row* (Mantler’s favorite and inspiration), before joining Tony Williams’ Lifetime, alongside John McLaughlin and Larry Young. It was his appearance in a leading role on Carla Bley and Paul Haines’s epic *Escalator Over the Hill* in 1971 that brought him into contact with Mantler, with whom he recorded *No Answer* three years later before touring in 1987 in a Mantler sextet that also included Rick Fenn from 10cc, Nick Mason from Pink Floyd, Don Preston from the Mothers of Invention and John Greaves from Henry Cow.

Marianne Faithfull had no thoughts of a performing career when she was spotted at a party by the Rolling Stones’ manager, Andrew Oldham, in 1964. She earned a certain notoriety as a symbol of Swinging London before re-emerging in 1979 with *Broken English*, a startling personal album which made an impression on Mantler. In 1987 he approached her through the record producer Hal Willner, a friend who had just made an album, *Strange Weather*, with Faithfull.

Robert Wyatt had been a founder member of the Soft Machine, its drummer and occasional singer, before forming his own band, Matching Mole, in 1971. An accident in 1973 left him unable to play drums but did not prevent him from embarking on a series of extraordinary solo albums, from *Rock Bottom* in 1974 to *Comiciopera* in 2007, and collaborations with many others, including Björk, David Gilmour, Brian Eno and Mary Halvorson. He remembers interpreting Soupault's *Tant de temps* – in the original French – with particular fondness. “I loved doing that! A case where the ‘song’ was so haunting – inspired, of course, by the achingly poignant poem itself. I found that I loved singing in French. I’d learned some French when I was a child, and learned something of the music in the language. And I was so grateful to Mike for the opportunity to use that.”

Opening with the sounds of Mantler's trumpet and the guitar of Rick Fenn – the two solo instrumental voices – over the orchestra, the album contains 27 pieces within its 36 minutes, some of them – like Beckett's *Vieil Aller* and *Rien Nul*, both intoned by Faithfull – barely 20 seconds long. A mosaic of languages and voices is unified by the composer's distinctive tonal world, with its pervasive air of unease. “I don't deliberately write ‘dark’ music,” Mantler has said. “It's simply there. I have no particular desire to write ‘light’ music, and I would indeed find it difficult to do so. I don't think that life and the human existence in general are such positive events, so I don't feel especially challenged to express the opposite.”

On *Cerco un Paese Innocente*, recorded in 1994 in Copenhagen, where Mantler lived on his return from the US to Europe

(now recording for the first time directly for ECM Records, having left his own WATT label behind), the edges are softened, the textures warmed, the lyricism more generous. Here Mantler employs the poems of Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888-1970), born to Tuscan parents in Egypt and associated as a young man with the Futurist and Dadaist movements. After experiencing war as a member of an infantry brigade in Italy and France between 1915-18, Ungaretti abandoned and then re-embraced the Catholic faith and was associated with the Fascist regime before and after a professorship at the University of São Paolo from 1936-42. Expelled from a post at Rome's University after the fall of Mussolini, he was reinstated at the insistence of his colleagues. Much of his poetry is marked by a pervasive awareness of loss. In 1969, the year before Ungaretti himself died, he was nominated – alongside Paul Celan, Nathalie Sarraute, Robert Lowell and others, for the Nobel literature prize, awarded to Beckett. As with Meister's poetry, Mantler was introduced to Ungaretti's work by a friend, the German journalist and documentary film maker Birgitta Ashoff.

The hour-long suite, divided into four parts and containing 19 fragments of poetry, is scored for the sections of the Danish Radio Big Band plus a string quartet and soloists including Mantler and the Swedish guitarist Bjarne Roupé, who fills the role previously played by Terje Rypdal, Larry Coryell, Chris Spedding, Philippe Cathérine, Mike Stern and Rick Fenn. Ungaretti's words are sung by Mona Larsen, a Danish singer whom Mantler met soon after moving back to Europe in 1991. “Again, I had been looking for a voice preferably from rock and jazz rather than the classical world, and Mona had actually been a very successful and popular

singer – with the Halberg Larsen group – in the 1980s. By the time I met her, she had pretty much left the pop scene and become a quite exceptional jazz singer.” They worked together in Mantler’s Chamber Music and Songs Ensemble before Larsen studied Italian in order to deliver Ungaretti’s texts, brief but carrying the weight of aphorisms: “Beginning has us singing/And we sing to make an ending.”

The third album, *Hide and Seek*, recorded in Copenhagen in 2000, adapts dialogue from a one-act play by Paul Auster, the American novelist (born in Newark, New Jersey in 1947) celebrated for his *New York Trilogy*. Aware of Auster’s early work, which he calls “quirky, intelligent, sparse,” Mantler read the play – then unperformed – and liked the Beckettian set-up of two actors, a man and a woman, each in an upright wooden box, spotlit on a darkened stage.

Against a score for 11 instrumentalists (including Mantler and Roupé), two singers deliver a conversation that explores the awkwardness of communication. The man is Robert Wyatt; the woman is Susi Hyldgaard, a Danish singer (and pianist) who, although born in New York, grew up in Copenhagen. After studying musicology at Copenhagen University and pursuing her own solo career, she had worked with Mantler on his opera, *The School of Understanding*, in 1996. “She’s not only an astounding singer and personality,” Mantler says, “but also a consummate musician in general, a rare combination. She brings an exceptional professionalism and musicality to everything she does.”

Hyldgaard also makes a perfect pair with Wyatt as they bicker and spar, prod and provoke, testing the limits and

inadequacies of language. (She: “If you have nothing to say, maybe you just shouldn’t bother to say it.” He: “Speak for yourself.”) In a cathartic passage midway through, both are crying for help. Mantler demonstrates his ability to create his own particular kind of chamber music, deploying vibraphone or marimba, accordion (played by Hyldgaard), guitar, brass and a string section to underscore the shifts of emotion and meaning. As with most relationships, the resolution resists simple closure.

Having begun with Wyatt, let’s give him the last word on the experience of entering Michael Mantler’s world. “Not reading music,” he says, “I have to memorise other musicians’ parts, as well as the lines I’ve been invited to try out with them, of course. The first useful hint I picked up working for Mike was this: whatever notes you might think would fit the flow of the chord sequences – well, they’re likely to be wrong. So, get used to the fact that the note you’re aiming for is the least predictable. Except when it isn’t.”