

MICHAEL MANTLER

EDITIONS

VOLUME FIVE

COMMENTARY

(SORT-OF) AN OPERA
AND SONGS

INTRODUCTION

— BY RICHARD WILLIAMS

What sort of music do we most need in these disturbed times? Something to soothe and console, certainly. Something to help us dance our way through the gloom, of course. Something to ensure, as well, that the finer instincts of the human mind remain open to stimulus. But perhaps most of all we need music that observes and warns.

Sometimes the music Michael Mantler composes is about nothing but itself. Listeners to those pieces are not given explicit guides to intention or meaning but are free to find their own path and make their own response. That was true of the three instrumental works included in Vol. 4 of this series of scores, the duo pieces performed by Mantler and the synthesizer player Don Preston in 1985, the large-scale piece from 1998 called *One Symphony*, and the duets created in 2010 for the guitarist Bjarne Roupé and the pianist Per Salo. It is emphatically not true of the pieces to be found in Vol. 5, the “sort-of-an-opera” titled *The School of Understanding* and the song cycle for voice and large ensemble called *Comment c’est*, both part of the continuing sequence of work Mantler has produced in collaboration with the ECM label over the past half-century.

Recorded 20 years apart, these are large-scale works of the sort with which Mantler has studded his career since assembling the forces of the Jazz Composer’s Orchestra

to record his *Communications* series in New York in 1968. They are also very clearly about something. *The School of Understanding* opens its ears to the tenuous nature of communication between human beings, an interest manifested by Mantler in his career-long recourse to the writings of Samuel Beckett, the master of the space between what we mean and what we say. *Comment c’est* lives up to a title borrowed from Beckett: an examination of the way things are in our troubled world, a catalogue of human flaws and self-inflicted wounds.

A “sort-of-an-opera”? “I never intended to write an opera within the generally accepted meaning of the term,” Mantler has said of *The School of Understanding*. “To me, and probably to most of the world, the word ‘opera’ means something very specific, something *The School of Understanding* is definitely not. Therefore in order not to confuse anybody and make that immediately clear, I decided to give it the ‘sort-of’ subtitle. That may not exactly clarify what it really is, but at least it excludes a large conventional musical category. Yet it does make some sense. It is ‘sort-of-an-opera’, since it was originally conceived to be performed as a multi-media ‘theatrical concert’ with a certain amount of visual elements. It was, however, always intended that the music could nevertheless also stand on its own on purely musical terms in a recorded version.”

Its fundamental theme, he said, is “communicating, recognizing and considering certain universal problems in today’s society.” The original setting was a conversation class in a language school, and when the work was first performed on stage as a “theatrical concert”, in Copenhagen in 1996, its title was indeed *The School of Languages* and the libretto was written in several different languages. The performance and the subsequent recording, also in Copenhagen, was given by a group of seven singers, 10 instrumentalists and the strings of the Danish Radio Concert Orchestra, conducted by Giordano Bellincampi, with projections of news bulletins and images by the great Brazilian photojournalist Sebastião Salgado. By the time of the recording, and a second concert the following year in Berlin with the same performers, the multilingual aspect had been eliminated and the title changed. For the CD, the news text was relocated in the accompanying booklet (sample: *Civil war continued to ravage the southern regions when insurgents attacked a small town on the outskirts of the capital. Close to 2,000, including women and children, were burned to death and scores of others were critically wounded in the residential enclave just kilometers from the government center. Torn bodies are still being pulled from the rubble...*).

The singers were drawn from Mantler’s regular cast, playing the parts of Observer (Jack Bruce), Teacher (Per Jørgensen), Refugee (Mona Larsen), Journalist (Susi Hyldgaard), Student (Karen Mantler), Businessman (John Greaves), Doctor (Don Preston), and Guest Observer (Robert Wyatt): a mixed bag from varied backgrounds, including former members of Cream, the Soft Machine, Henry Cow and the Mothers of Invention.

“To me as a composer, the human voice is one of the most interesting and challenging instruments to write for,” Mantler has said. “Not necessarily in every one of its many manifestations, but there are always (still and again) voices that I want to hear in my music. The voices I like all have a certain dramatic quality, which I think is absolutely necessary to express the intentions of the words and therefore the music. I want them to have character and be naturally rough, somewhat unpolished, maybe even broken, with an expressive edge, yet musical. The singers I am using have all these qualities, in varying degrees, yet they are quite different from each other, and I find that they provide interesting contrasts.”

Voices such as these, he points out, usually come from jazz or popular music. “The only problem is to find someone sophisticated enough to sing difficult music and identify with the equally difficult words.” The words in much of *The School of Understanding*, however, reflect the nature of speech between people trying to establish a connection through dialogue that is confined to back-and-forth banalities, as in this exchange between Greaves and Karen Mantler (Businessman and Student): “And what about yourself?” “What do you want to know?” “What do you do, what have you done?” “I’ve moved around, lived here and there.” “Tell me more. I want to know you...” But those mundane phrases are hard to sing with the necessary conviction, too. In “Understanding”, Wyatt (over a synth-drum track by Preston) examines the paradox of communication, sometimes more possible between people who don’t speak the same language than between people who do.

And then the register changes and the tone darkens, which is when the technical and emotional demands become more obvious. Could there have been anyone better equipped with the necessary expressive technique to deliver the words “they have no hope / they suffer / and then they die”, with which Bruce (as the Observer) closes a passage sung in the track called “Health and Poverty”? Or anyone better fitted to orchestrate them than the composer? Bleak strings hold a thick voicing before sliding suddenly down to silence, like the line on a heart monitor taking a dive.

Moments later, when the music resumes, we hear the sound of Mantler himself: that rich, open trumpet tone with its shallow vibrato, declamatory without being overbearing. Mantler absented himself as a performer from his own recordings as early as 1973, when *No Answer* — the first time he devised settings of Beckett’s texts — featured a trio of Bruce, Carla Bley and Don Cherry. But his appearances in *The School of Understanding*, particularly at the somber closing of “Intolerance”, are highly effective, as are those of the other instrumentalists, particularly Roupé, who restores “Health and Poverty” to provisional life with a hint of guitar boogie. In terms of the instrumental music, this sort-of-opera is notable for the inventiveness with which Mantler exploits his resources, paring them away for the haunting final section, “What Is the Word”, in which lines from Samuel Beckett’s last work are passed around between all the participants.

A Beckett novel of 1961, a meditation on solitude and obscurity, is the source of the title of *Comment c’est*, an agitprop song cycle in 10 parts written for the voice of the

French singer Himiko Paganotti, Mantler’s trumpet and the Max Brand Ensemble, a 12-piece chamber group, augmented by the piano of David Helbock and conducted by Christoph Cech. Mantler’s involvement with the work of the Irish poet and playwright goes back at least to the Jazz Composer’s Orchestra in 1968; paragraphs from the original *Comment c’est* were quoted in the booklet that came with the JCO album. Beckett’s translation of the title, *How It Is*, is also Mantler’s subtitle. Only one voice is heard in this new work, recorded at the Porgy and Bess Studio in Vienna in 2016, but the impact on the listener is no less. The subject is the hell we are in the process of creating on earth: a 21st century hell, but with immemorial echoes.

The lyrics are in French, the language in which Beckett chose to write. Here’s how the first song of Mantler’s begins, in the English translation: “Today / like everyday / facing the news / ignorance, intolerance, chauvinism, bigotry, nationalism, dictatorships, hostilities, assaults, invasions, wars, methodical violence, ethnic cleansing, genocide, hatred, the horror / and again, and again, and again, again...”

So humanity repeats its follies, from which Mantler doesn’t flinch. Reading like bulletins from today’s events in Syria, Tigray province or the Donbass, the lyrics deal with fear of the other, the military-industrial complex, the spread of hatred, the return of torture (if it ever went away), and other currently relevant concerns. There is a kind of poetry here, too, in the mostly unadorned language which cuts from the eye of an all-seeing observer to the first-person testimony of a nameless participant, witness, or victim, and back again.

These are art songs, making use of Mantler's command of both contemporary classical music and jazz to create an idiom perfectly suited to the through-composed structures. The voice of Himiko Paganotti, a former member of Magma, is grave and poised, avoiding melodrama even in its most impassioned moments (such as on the song called "Sans fin"), matching its poignancy to the sober textures drawn from the ensemble of flute, oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, French horn, tuba, two violins, viola, cello, double bass, piano and vibraphone/marimba. The rhythms, although sometimes making use of a tuned-percussion ostinato, are usually episodic or rubato.

The prevailing mood is inevitably short of comfort but never gratuitously austere. Although restrained, the music is suffused with humanity. There are melodies here, if not necessarily the kind you sing along with, and Mantler's concise solos — the music's only improvised element, often responding to Ms Paganotti's lines — stick in the mind. Every minute of *Comment c'est*, all the way to its unsparing close, rewards concentrated attention. Its confrontation with cheerless reality forms a necessary antidote to the lies and evasions, the cynicism and brutality that made its creation as necessary as any task Mantler has undertaken in his long and distinguished career.