

ASSENS, 31 May 2015

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To begin with, I would like to tell you how we met, Dessá and I. Because the circumstances surrounding this meeting reveal a lot about the artist's personality, the sources of her inspiration and the nature of our friendship.

It was in December 2000. Dessá often spent time in Berlin, not only to take care of her exhibitions, do her research or see friends, but also to enjoy the rich musical life of the German capital.

We found ourselves seated next to one another in the hall of the Komische Oper, the Comic Opera. Not for a show, but for a concert of the Opera's orchestra which has its own symphonic season. The programme included Works by Arnold Schönberg, Alexander Zemlinsky and Franz Schreker, three Jewish Viennese composers of the same generation, three key figures of the avant-garde at the start of the 20th century, three victims of Nazi racist politics.

As of 1990, I have been active in the functions of playwright (musical, musicologist) editor and CD Producer for composers bannished during the 3rd Reich. In 1996 I had the pleasure of producing a CD with the Berlin Kammersymphonie, a first world recording of a key piece by Schreker, a danced pantomime « The Birthday of the Infanta », based on the tale with the same title by Oscar Wilde, and inspired by the paintings of Vélazquez. This composition, commissioned by Gustav Klimt for the grand exhibition of the Viennese Secession of 1908, not only marked the beginning of Schreker's career but also the birth of « Ausdruckstanz », the expressionist dance which leads straight to Mary Wigman and her successors until today.

It was this piece that was on the programme of the concert at the Komische Oper ; Dessá, having discovered the music thanks to my CD which she had bought, came to hear the music « live ». ....

Whoever knows Dessá can easily imagine the development of our encounter that day. In any case, even before the orchestra had begun to play, we already knew the essentials about each other ; and we both were rather flabbergasted how efficient destiny had been in choosing this concert to place us side by side, in a hall that seats 1400 people.

Because it is evident we had much more in common than our shared interest for this piece by Schreker. A few days later I had my own copy of her book with her art inspired by Viktor Ullmann's Piano Sonata No. 7, written in Terezin shortly before his deportation to Auschwitz in October 1944.

In October 1944 Benjamin Britten was in the process of writing his opera « *Peter Grimes* », a key pièce in lyric opera of the 20th century, profoundly imbued with the loss of human values during the Second World War.

My playwright activities at the Opera of Bielefeld in the 1990's, concerning composers interned in Terezin, had a decisive influence on my life ; my own production of the children's opera *Brundibár*, by Ullmann's fellow sufferer Hans Krasa, deported to Auschwitz in the same transportation as Ullmann, led to my change of work that brought me to Berlin in 1997. Since then, as an editor, Britten's music is an essential part of my work with editions at Boosey and Hawkes.

After this first meeting with Dessa, I not only had the luck and pleasure of becoming a friend, to closely follow her itinerary and artistic development, but also to be more than a spectator and admirer, and be able to contribute to her ideas, taking part in some of the projects that unite us, as one can imagine, art and music.

Art and music. I have never met an artist for whom another artistic discipline other than her own, can have such an importance, as for Dessa. This must be emphasized, because all the specificity and singularity of her creation lies within this phenomenon. The music is not only a stimulation, or source of inspiration, it is almost the condition « sine qua non » to awake, and to nourish her creative spirit.

Certainly, there are paintings that have nothing to do with music such as her wonderful « Landscapes » or her collages connected to the legendary Berlin department store N. Israel, founded in 1815 ; but the biggest part of her work is unthinkable without it ; without the exchange with concrete works of art music from the 20th and 21st centuries - which in her approach differs from that of the American Jackson Pollock « action-paintings » where Jazz was his inspiration. The palette of composers with which Dessa deals extends from the 20th century modern classics - Messiaen, Ullmann, Bernstein, Bloch, Mahler, Rota - until composers of our time such as the German Detlev Glanert, the Korean Unsuk Chin or the Swiss Dominique Gesseney-Rappo. Nothing, naturally, has yet been said about the quality and originality of her painting. But it does give us a key towards a better understanding of her art.

A revolution was necessary in order that the relationship between music and painting could become « visible ». That of abstraction. As long as painting is a mirror of reality, the correspondances remain superficial. Painting and music have resorted, certainly, to the same vocabulary for a long time. In that the two senses are sensitive to the same « waves », those of light which define the quality of the colours, and those which define the height of sounds. In German there is no other word to define the character of an instrument's sound other than « die Klang-Farbe » (the sound-colour). The « rhythm » describes the organisation of beats in a dance as well as the sequence of the brush movements which all together define an image of an apple or a human being. And how many abstract paintings, since a hundred years, are titled « Composition » ? As soon as painting turns its back on reality - to the visible world - it truly becomes a composition, following the same rules as for music, as it can say nothing more what the assembly of its language elements - colours, forms, materials - can communicate.

Music is an important reference for the pioneers of abstraction. You can read this in their manifestos, such as Kandinsky's « The Spiritual in Art ». You can observe the great influence music has upon the works of transition between figurative and abstract painting of Klee, Kupka, Kandinsky, Schlemmer, and in the cubist compositions of Braque and Picasso. Klee, who hesitated for a long time between the professional life of a musician or visual artist, is inspired by counterpoint structures of Bach or the melodies of Mozart. The relationship we discover in his work - as with many others - is that of analogy. It is the architectural aspect of counterpoint that will be « translated » into pictorial structures, not the effect of a concrete fugue whose sonic energy is « converted » into visual energy at the time of perception.

« The auditory input in my work plays a most important role » writes Dossa in her catalogue of paintings inspired by Viktor Ullmann's Piano Sonata No. 7, and she continues « I privilege sound, the most archaic of the five senses, for it has been shown that the fetus reacts to sound ».

It is evident that here, the notion of the term « sound » touches chords other than those of a guitar, in Georges Braque's still life. It is the sound that unites us with the world, but not a world of appearances, or delusions, as Schopenhauer would say, but with « reality itself », the essence of existence.

Preceding Dossa's creation is a gesture of open-mindedness, mental liveliness, her natural ability for communication, permeability and also vulnerability. It is a purely total musical attitude that puts her in vibration. To paint is to react with all of her being, not only with the brain and the hand. To paint is to use her body as a receptor that captures the music's energy before re-coding it into another medium. To paint is to dance.

She makes the kinetic energy of the music visible, seizing it as it explodes and sets it on the canvas, as if her paint brush was a magic wand.

« In the music », says Dossa, in connection to Viktor Ullmann's composition, « I can « hear » different images : forces pulling away or colliding, sparks and flashes, long undulating movement, darkness and light, gaiety and sadness ». And further on: « These paintings are from the depths of my soul, from heart and innermost being rather than brain and thought process.

« Dossa is a painter of the soul, and it is not a coincidence if she feels strong affinity with the music of Mahler, Ullmann and Britten, with the composers of the 20th century who profoundly loved life, and who profoundly suffered from life, who were able to express their emotions inexhaustibly rich musicality and could convert their language of their souls, « the most intimate of their being » into messages intended for the whole of humanity.

Dossa's art works are, in fact, dialogues expressed as paintings. They are dialogues that often resemble spiritual exercises. Because - if they are not in direct communication with a musician like today's improvisation - they require a lot of solitude, concentration and sacrifice. With interlocutors such as Mahler, Schreker, Ullmann or Britten one simply cannot

discuss. One has to love them, know them well, their ideas, their destiny, their tragedy. Without this, they do not open up to us. In Dessa's work, not enough has been said with respect to the music and the composers, but I think it is more and more important to do so.

Dessa, painter of the soul. The wounded soul of the 20th century is the origin of many of her paintings, but strangely not one saddens us. There must be a lot of regenerative force « in the most intimate part of her being » not to retreat before all the catastrophes that have marked the history of humanity until now. Especially when one's own life story and family history has been heavily affected by them.

The exhibition here today in Assens pays homage to two important cycles dating from different periods of Dessa's creation. 15 years separate these two series. This is a most fortunate event as the simultaneity enables us to recognise the constants in her work as well as their further development.

We can observe that her language is enriched with extra pictorial elements. To the purely abstract dynamism in the paintings linked to the emotional cosmos for the five movements in Ullman's sonata, are added in the paintings based on the four interludes of the opera *Peter Grimes*, narrative elements such as citations from the libretto, allowing us to situate a painting within a specific moment in the drama's development ; or fragments of the composer's hand written score, a technique that Dessa already explored in her paintings inspired by compositions of Detlev Glanert and Unsuk Chin.

These written elements keep their signification whilst gaining additional pictorial value. The picture invites to be seen, « read » and heard simultaneously within different levels of perception. It is fascinating to see how Dessa plays with this double sense of signs and how she perfects their implementation.

To this strategy in the most recent period is an element of material has been added, notably in her cycle « Stolpersteine », « Stones-of-pride », the artist's response to the problematic mode of « Stolpersteine », « stumbling blocks » that in many German towns are laid in the pavements in front of the homes where Jewish people lived before their deportation. Problematic, because these stones which are in fact bronze metal plaques, reduce the individuals to their status as victims, placing the act of commemoration at the level of one's feet (where they are exposed to the weather and street dirt) instead of at the level of one's eyes. By integrating real stones into her work, Dessa recalls the Jewish tradition of placing a stone on the grave of the deceased, restoring dignity.

« This project has very deep personal meaning and has brought to light a new dimension regarding my own conception of the Holocaust » writes Dessa, still on the subject of Viktor Ullmann, and she continues : « The in-depth soul searching linked to this music has made me ask many questions for which I do not have the answers ».

It is this force of interrogation, in the face of life's dark side, its secrets and mysteries, that there are questions to which there are no answers other than what art can give, is what Dessa's paintings are telling us.

Thank you for your attention.

Frank Harders-Wuthenow