

A UNISON OF COMPOSITION AND INTERPRETATION

The Wet Ink Ensemble Out of New York

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The vocalist speaks and sings, her tones colored by the flutist, who sometimes also sings and hums along. Both are so parallel and close to one another that the separate passages can hardly be distinguished. *Only the Words Mean What They Say*, the title of the piece by Kate Soper, is a monody (single voiced passage) for two voices – or a heterophonic unison (multi-voiced single melody). In the performance by the composer and the flutist, Erin Lesser, one experiences immediately and in unmistakable fashion how the musicians interact and coordinate with each other.

Kate Soper, born in 1981, raised in Michigan, and known among other things for her musical theatre works, sought in this piece a new challenge; she wanted to expand her voice technique and chose for that purpose the instrumental confrontation: “The flute is very similar to the voice, as respects breath control, tone, and range, and I knew of Erin’s ability to produce multiple sounds and quarter tones.” So Soper met often with the flutist of the ensemble; they improvised, tried out notes, Erin Lesser made suggestions for simplifying the technique, and together they developed an instrumental speech in unison. Kate Soper says she had never before composed such a virtuoso piece that places such demands on her in its performance. “But working together with Erin it was a pleasure.”

The work of these two provides a good example of how new pieces arise out of the Wet Ink Ensemble from New York: through close dialogue between composition and interpretation (but also improvisation) – into a divergent unison, as is characteristic for this Ensemble. The resulting output of this distinctly heterogeneous cast of flute, violin, voice, saxophone, piano, percussion, and electronics, often contains a social-musical aspect. The playing together, the growing together of two voices is developed. And, as all the Ensemble members agree, it benefits the pieces enormously that they are all close and friendly with each other.

What has just been sketched is then tried out; what has just been composed is then performed. The ink is indeed still very wet when the interpretation comes in contact with the score. But it actually wasn’t this aspect that gave the impetus for the name. That impetus goes farther back to the very first beginnings in the year 1998. At that time, Wet Ink got along in part even without ink. The initial impetus, so says the saxophonist Alex Mincek, the co-founder of the Ensemble, was “the improvisation, but at the same time the desire to compose oneself and to perform our own pieces.” To that end, we wanted to create a platform where we could play composers that we admired. Mozart’s compositions would also have been performed, if they had just been finished. We wished for composition to be something living, something in the present. And at that time, with the musical past being central in the conservatories, it became very tempting to concentrate instead on the newest and freshest pieces.

Out of this initial impulse, the Wet Ink Ensemble was developed. But it was only several years later that it found its current actual form. In 2004, at Columbia University, Mincek met the vocalist Kate Soper and the pianist Eric Wubbels; then in 2006, at the Darmstadt Vacation Courses, he met the electronics person Sam Pluta. And so the Ensemble gradually formed itself into a definite structure with a particular individuality: of the seven members, four were also composers. Thus, on the one side, were the flutist Erin Lesser, the violinist Joshua Modney, and the percussionist Ian Antonio – and on the other side were the composers/interpreters Mincek, Soper, Wubbels and Pluta. And out of this combination arose the close collaboration.

As Alex Mincek, for example, wrote his piece, *Color, Form, Line*, he had the qualities and sonorities of his musical colleagues firmly in mind and used them to develop special colorations, techniques, and sounds. These reflections on the interpretation flow into the composition. And after the performance Alex Mincek revised the piece again, in light of the experience, so that the piece could be further developed for a new performance. In this way he picks up on the remarks of his colleagues: “Everything is possible only because of the close relationship of trust among us all.”

The “bare” interpreters have an important role to play, both in the formation of the program, as well as in the pieces themselves. At the collegiate level, so says the violinist Joshua Modney, one develops a performance practice – as in a workshop, or even a fixed research laboratory. “The composers, of course, have a good deal of experience with instruments, but sometimes they come up with ideas that don’t work. Then we work together to find a solution that translates the original idea.” On the other hand, sometimes this effort leads him to discover he can do something with his instrument that he had not thought possible. The interpreter (artist?) thus becomes part of the new piece, just as the piece becomes part of him. Finally, he has also learned to improvise in the Wet Ink Ensemble, something with which he previously had had little experience. He brings this experience meanwhile to his other Ensemble, the Mivos Quartet, with which he is just as often involved and where he performs, in part, Wet-Ink compositions.

Communication Among Like-Minded

The exceptional thing in the cast is the integration of electronics as an instrument. Sam Pluta, the 35-year young electronics player of the group, uses his laptop not only for compositions, but also for free improvisation, whereby new compositions are created. Through improvisation with the musician Jim Altieri, who brings out the finest microtones on his violin, Pluta developed the piece *Portraits/Self Portrait*, now with a larger ensemble: a reflection on the musical process, a re-composition of its energy and its improvised sounds. The violin part reproduces quite precisely what Altieri played before. Sam Pluta transcribed it, the Ensemble-Violinist Modney took it up anew, Pluta for his part improvised on it with the computer and recently wrote it down. Thus arose a new piece.

This is a further example of the communication among like-minded. “For a composer it is priceless when he knows that his music will be performed at the absolutely highest level,” says Pluta. “It is, of course, great when a new piece is interpreted, but it is even better when one’s entire personality is encompassed by the interpreter. Wet Ink brings out every musician’s personality, and thus arises a unique dialogue.” This exchange over the sound and the art of writing music is extraordinary. “In this respect, I have been very fortunate.” These musicians are thus of one mind in being firmly committed to trying out new things. But there is another side to this collegiality: It can be somewhat frustrating when one has to compose for another Ensemble, says Eric Wubbels, because then one can’t engage in this same process. Wet Ink thus offers all Ensemble members an ideal workshop for the development of new pieces. Since 2005/06 the group has finally grown together – after a lengthy process of transformation. Through Kate Soper musical theatre aspects have also appeared.

Wet Ink plays almost exclusively new music. A few pieces by Luigi Nono, Morton Feldman or Mathias Spahlinger are the oldest in the repertoire that the Ensemble has ever played, in addition to a few improvisational pieces by composers from the Chicago Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), which formerly came from Free Jazz. Wet Ink is special among New York Ensembles not only because it frequently performs compositions of its own members, but also because it knows and plays music from outside the USA. Close contacts have developed, for example, with the Austrian Peter Ablinger, the English saxophonist Evan Parker, and the Swiss Katharina Rosenberger, who teaches in San Diego.

To which tradition of avant-garde does Wet Ink feel itself most indebted? “Earlier,” according to Alex Mincek, “we stood primarily in the tradition of the experimental music of the US – thus the New York school around Cage; but today I am no longer sure and don’t know whether one can pin down the group so precisely. The influences are heterogeneous. Thus one can sometimes hear (in our work) the Minimal Music, which, though, is obviously further developed. In his piece *Shiverer*, for example, Eric Wubbels works strongly with unison and rhythm, which in repetition move against each other. And he consciously followed further what the US-American Minimalists discovered, and what afterwards was widely imitated by others: “The early Minimal Music, but also the Minimal Art, had a great influence on Wet Ink,” according to Wubbels, “above all because this music strives for clarity. This simplicity is not a defect, but a concentration on what is essential.” However intricate the pieces of Wet Ink may sometimes sound, they nevertheless attempt to communicate in the clearest possible way. That makes for high quality.

Is there, then, behind this an Ensemble-Aesthetic? It would be hard to describe what the totality comes to, says Alex Mincek. Perhaps it would be the common interest in sound and texture and in the liveliness of their music, also in virtuosity, an Ensemble-virtuosity. One employs quite understandably the entire spectrum of sound and music, from pure tone to white noise – which is best seen in the improvisations as common tone-speech. But in the end, it proved hard for any of them to say what in the music was recognizable. Only Eric Wubbels suggests one indication might be the kind of orchestration and the handling of the unisons, which otherwise are frequently taboo in the New Music. Is that it? In any event, unison appears to be an apt metaphor for this Ensemble: a common shock device and the courage to take risks. One wants in any case not to be boring, but, rather, to offer something exciting. And in fact the concerts of the Wet Ink Ensemble are of an extraordinary vitality.