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# Music production in the intercultural sphere: challenges and opportunities

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As a South African composer working in a culturally, politically and ecologically heterogeneous environment, I deliberately refer to musical ‘differences’ in many of my works. The artistic vision developed in these works finds expression in the fusion of ‘differences’ and often highly disparate materials into unified forms of expression. In this article I respond to Kofi Agawu’s contestation of ‘difference’ from a complexity perspective indebted to Edgar Morin’s reflections on diverse systems and Paul Cilliers’s interpretation of non-foundational complexity. I use informed performance practice to respond to the overarching topic of this volume – translation – and offer a discussion of my composition *The Songs of Madosini* (2002) as an instance of cultural translation.

## Musiekproduksie in die interkulturele sfeer: uitdagings en geleenthede

As ’n Suid-Afrikaanse komponis werksaam binne die kultureel, politiek en ekologies heterogene kontekste van my omgewing, verwys ek in sommige van my werke doelbewus na musikale ‘verskille’. Nietemin word musikale verskille – selfs hoogs uiteenlopende musikale materiaal – in hierdie werke in organiese uitdrukkingvorms gekombineer. In hierdie artikel antwoord ek op Kofi Agawu se aanvegtig van ‘verskil’ vanuit ’n kompleksiteitsperspektief, met verwysing na Edgar Morin en Paul Cilliers se spesifieke vertolkings van stelsel- en kompleksiteitsteorie. Ek bespreek historiese uitvoeringspraktyk om tot die oorkoepelende tema van hierdie volume, naamlik vertaling, by te dra. Ek bespreek laastens my komposisie, *The Songs of Madosini* (2002), as ’n voorbeeld van kulturele vertaling.

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Ten years ago I embarked on a musical collaboration with Madosini, a veteran amaMpondo musician. At that stage, having just returned from a 14-year-long European sojourn, where I worked as Baroque cellist and composer, I perceived South Africa's musical potential by and large from an external perspective. From this vantage point, the apparently unrelated and unmediated coexistence of African and Western traditions was conspicuous. This personal impression decisively motivated me to embark on a range of projects, aimed at transferring something of the unique quality of stylistically performed indigenous African music to the politically beleaguered and artistically isolated concert stages of 'classical' Western music. While they had no intention of questioning the hallmarks of what I perceive to be the legitimacy of a certain Western tradition, they did aim to demonstrate that proficient (Western) musical renditions could nevertheless become imbued with a particular local flair and sensibility. Moreover, I was prompted by a belief that Western performance traditions could (and should) be freed from their isolation without jeopardising musical quality. Following various strategies of transcribing, quoting, assimilating, or freely referencing instances or certain aspects of indigenous music on different occasions, the purpose of the collaboration with Madosini was to involve her immediately as 'informant' and performer.<sup>1</sup>

This approach resulted in the composition of the hybrid chamber-oratorio *The songs of Madosini*,<sup>2</sup> as well as an ongoing personal and trusting collaboration with Madosini that ultimately facilitated a total of sixteen performances of the work in various centres, including three European tours, over the course of a decade.<sup>3</sup> Characterised by many highly enjoyable rehearsals and touching human encounters,

1 The Appendix provides an overview of intercultural compositions created in this vein, which may serve to contextualise the project with Madosini.

2 Hans Huyssen, Lynedoch (2002): *The songs of Madosini*. Incidental music based on a selection of songs by Latozi Mpahleni, better known as Madosini, for clarinet, string quartet, narrator and Madosini on voice, *ubadi*, *umrbubbe* and *isitototolo*.

3 Performances of *The songs of Madosini*: Pretoria, 15 August 2002; Johannesburg, 17 August 2002; Cape Town, 20 August 2002; Vienna, 27 June 2003; Salzburg, 28 June 2003; Ingolstadt, 1 July 2003; Stellenbosch, 1 October 2003; Cape Town, 17 August 2005; Bonn, 23 September 2007; Sandton, 14 October 2007; Grahamstown, 26 and 28 June 2008; Stellenbosch, 12 March and 27 July 2009; Berlin, 29 October 2009, and Durban, 24 June 2010.

the project allowed various South African and European musicians to become familiar with Madosini and her music. A final important outcome was a week-long residency of Madosini at STIAS<sup>4</sup> in collaboration with DOMUS,<sup>5</sup> during which her biography and artistry, her educational visions as well as the project and its potential future perspectives were discussed.

Madosini repeatedly expressed her deep gratitude for the opportunities afforded her by *The songs of Madosini* to perform her music to a wider audience and capitalise on her specialised proficiency. She appreciated the recognition granted to her performances and idiomatically unique artistry in circles that would ordinarily be indifferent to her. Reciprocally, I remain deeply indebted to Madosini for her willingness not only to collaborate with me, but also to share generously her time, expertise and music, thereby significantly broadening my (and many other participants') musical horizons. Personally I ascribed importance to this project on various levels. It granted me a musical 'return to Africa', mirroring my recent physical relocation on another level. It also afforded me the opportunity to draw on my compositional as well as performance practice experiences in a new environment and to apply these in a contextually embedded and meaningful manner. In my work with Madosini, I was particularly eager to apply the methodology of historically informed performance practice (HIPP), which has been so eminently successful in the European Early Music revival. I foresaw that HIPP could be assimilated and extended to include cultural and spatial dimensions, and be applied to indigenous performance practice on ancient (read: period) African instruments. I wished to investigate whether this could offer a viable strategy of intervention to address the precarious situation of practitioners such as Madosini, while concurrently bridging a cultural divide, as HIPP had 'bridged' temporal separation by incorporating ancient music into mainstream performances. Finally, I wished to explore the possibility of a characteristically African form of contemporary music outside the determining bounds of *avant-garde* hegemony. What was important to me was the notion of

4 Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies (<[www.stias.ac.za](http://www.stias.ac.za)>).

5 *Documentation Centre for Music* based at the University of Stellenbosch (<[www.domus.ac.za](http://www.domus.ac.za)>).

locating novelty in specific contextualisations, rather than pursuing innovation on a material level.

Reflecting on the project, the number of performances of *The songs of Madosini* indicates a degree of success, considering the fact that new South African works are more often than not performed once and never again. Despite this quantitative measure of success, however, the piece has remained non-influential as a more general model of cross-cultural dialogue from the vantage point of ‘serious’ (classical) music. To the contrary, the approach of treating differing musical idioms in distinctly different manners has been severely criticised and my method as principally flawed.<sup>6</sup> Positioning *The songs of Madosini* as an instance of cultural translation, this article aims to explore matters of operational context, underlying philosophy, methodology, design and reception before offering an account of the project’s origins, performances and reception.<sup>7</sup>

## 1. The immanent and the transcendent: a country and its Constitution as guiding context for a compositional approach

Notions of diversity, heterogeneity, contrast and difference appear recurrently in descriptions of South Africa’s cultures, societies, histories, landscapes and ecology. Due to a strategic geographic position and historical circumstances enabling of African, European and Asian influences, South Africa is richly endowed with natural

6 The piece has on occasion been denounced outright for explicitly thematising ‘difference’, assuming that this implies a paternalistic and/or essentialist approach. Rejecting both attitudes in principle, I hope to show in the course of the article how these objections (frequently raised in the context of intercultural collaborations) are linked to a specific understanding of ‘difference’ and should not be apposite in this instance. It may be added that this general ‘dismissal’ only emphasises the conspicuous absence of any truly successful examples in the field: strangely, the topic of intercultural engagement does not seem to be of great importance in the current compositional sphere. In a telling example, Kevin Volans stated: “For me, the moment for this kind of work [referencing African music] has passed, along with the apartheid State” (Pooley 2008: 139).

7 I wish to acknowledge valuable comments and editorial suggestions on previous versions of this article by Prof Stephanus Muller, Prof Jannie Hofmeyr as well as several anonymous reviewers.

and cultural differences. This bounty of possibilities is balanced by tensions and potential conflicts relating to 'diversity'.

Coming to terms with 'difference' has been an ongoing challenge throughout South Africa's history. A stubborn characteristic of the 'real' (in the sense of 'pluralistic') world, 'difference' has defied modern and postmodern attempts at resolving its contradictions. During colonialism, 'difference' caused fear, suspicion, insecurity, or hatred. This led to genocide, slavery or other kinds of abuse, oppression or marginalisation. A modernist understanding of 'irreconcilable difference' has given rise to ideologies such as apartheid, segregated development and, more recently, affirmative action and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). As these political projects indicate, interventions based on the perception of 'difference' as 'a problem to be overcome' or a 'phenomenon to be eradicated' result in a continuous deadlock of oppositional ideological positions and ensuing political battles.

It is for this reason that the notion of 'difference' is stigmatised in postcolonial discourse, where it is often denied or wishfully reinterpreted as an underlying 'sameness'. An exemplary case is Kofi Agawu's widely quoted stance of "contesting difference" to which he dedicates an entire chapter in *Representing African music* (Agawu 2003). Referring to difference as "*the sign of our time*" (Agawu 2003: 151, original italics), he embarks on a substantial piece of critique thereof, invoking voices from the fields of gender, race and musicological studies. Analysing traditional ethnomusicology's implicit methodological subscription to principles of difference, he echoes what may be summarised as postcolonial discourse's principal concerns about 'difference': that it acts as foundation for the "classical binary opposition between Self and Other" (Agawu 2003: 153) and that it follows "an inherited tradition of European representations" (Agawu 2003: 156) as a "persistent strategy of differencing" that serves to maintain "the imbalance of power" (Agawu 2003: 157). Asserting that "categories of perception are made, not given" (Agawu 2003: 164), he questions "that differences are self-evident or natural", suggesting instead that they are "propped up by other textual constructions" (Agawu 2003: 163). In short, Agawu argues, "differences" are no more than social constructs (Agawu 2003: 164). Doubting that true "cross-cultural understanding [is] ultimately possible", even under the

auspices of explicit participatory presentation or Gadamer's fusion of horizons (Agawu 2003: 167), finally leads him to the suggestion of "resisting difference" (Agawu 2003: 165). Agawu's alternative proposal of "embracing sameness" (Agawu 2003: 168) acknowledges the impossibility of simply eliminating "that which is not ultimately eliminable", yet nevertheless proceeds to do just that "in the spirit of a deconstruction" (Agawu 2003: 169). Ultimately, it is clear that Agawu's assumed sameness cannot circumvent ubiquitously prevailing differences. In addition, Agawu acknowledges the danger that 'sameness' can lead to a return of hegemonic homogenisation. And so – at the end of his lengthy exposition – he has to consent that all he can argue for is the "*presumption* of sameness" (original emphasis), which he hopes will "guarantee an ethical motivation" (Agawu 2003: 171) when confronted with difference. It is my contention that the moral obligation ("ethical motivation") to guard against the abuse of hierarchical structures or asymmetrical power relations based on perceived or real differences goes too far when it assumes the obligation to oppose the very notion of 'difference' itself. This happens when any distinction between "Self and Other" is simplistically and directly equated to an opposition "between the privileged and the underprivileged, [...] the have and have-nots, [...] the powerful and the powerless" (Agawu 2003: 153).<sup>8</sup>

Acknowledging 'difference' need not automatically imply a comparative or derogatory valorisation. Achille Mbembe, for example, acknowledges that a distinction between Self and Other need not be made in an essentialist, absolute manner, but that such a distinction remains necessary as a way of acknowledging a pluralistic world in which different world views are able to co-exist. He defines one of the core objectives of "postcolonial thinking, the critique of European

8 An important casualty of this strategy registers in the use of the term 'discrimination'. Imbued with negative connotations through its inflationary (ab)use in political jargon, its useful and constructive meanings have faded away. 'To discriminate' in principle means 'to distinguish', but current everyday usage in South Africa immediately evokes the notion 'to discredit, incriminate, disqualify', thus insinuating prejudice, bias and intolerance. From a systems view, discrimination implies an increase in difference, in richness of relations and constraints, in meaning – which is what produces more specific and nuanced identities. Thus current political discourse precludes the use of a concept that could be vital to facilitate diverse societies and life forms.

humanism and universalism” as “paving the way for an enquiry into the possibility of a politics of the fellow-creature. The prerequisite for such a politics is the recognition of the Other and of his or her difference” (Mbembe 2006). This approach suggests a perspective according to which diversity need not be sacrificed for the sake of unity or equality. Put differently, unity or equality need not – indeed should not – be propagated to the exclusion of differences or diversity.

This is also a perspective found in the preamble of South Africa’s Constitution: “We, the people of South Africa [...] believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, *united in our diversity* [...]” (RSA 1996; my italics, H H). It is pertinent how closely this constitutional declaration resonates with Edgar Morin’s description of complex systems. Arguably, as one of the most profound thinkers on this topic, Morin writes that any system is always “one and multiple”, as the whole and its parts are mutually constitutive. He states that a complex system is “one and diverse”, as only the difference between distinct components allows their organisation to be constituted. This leads him to the conclusion that for such systems “diversity is necessary to their unity, and their unity is necessary to their diversity” (Morin 1992: 113). What is commonly perceived as a problematic, even contradictory relationship is for Morin a relationship of interdependence and reciprocal ‘constitutiveness’. Juxtaposing South African constitutional aspirations and a specific philosophical inquiry into the nature of difference as constitutive component of heterogeneous or complex systems outlines the discoursing space in which *The songs of Madosini* was developed. If the composition was a spontaneous response to difference, this article may be read as an ensuing defence of difference.

Ultimately, ‘difference’ – and, by implication, diversity, variance, divergence, inconsistency, unpredictability, and so forth – is as characteristic of our world as are fundamental (unvarying, consistent, predictable) physical laws. The necessity of concurrently acknowledging seemingly opposing scientific views – the modernist (orderly, deductible, predictable, deterministic, Newtonian) as well as the postmodern (disorderly, holistic, unpredictable, relativistic) – gives rise to the idea of a “complexity paradigm” (Geyer 2003: 7). This is an approach in which paradoxes and incommensurabilities, even in the natural sciences, have to be accommodated. One way of describing

complexity theory is, therefore, to state that it “does not disprove the rationalist paradigm or its antithesis (postmodernism), but acts like a synthesis or bridge between the naturalism of rationalism and the anti-naturalism of postmodernism and creates a new framework which bridges the two opposing positions” (Geyer 2003: 15). In addition, it does not accept the hegemony of either position and thus forces us to adopt an ambivalent epistemology in which knowledge must be viewed as provisional, in which “greater knowledge may indicate increasing limitations to prediction and control” and where “there is no universal structure/endpoint to phenomena/knowledge” (Geyer 2003: 5).

While the acknowledgement of difference will be central to such an epistemology, the task of establishing and maintaining equal relationships across differences remains. This task entails a continuous effort at ‘trans-lating’, re-lating in the sense of re-aligning, stepping over, negotiating, finding and holding common or new ground, as prerequisite for communication or the transfer of meaning. The concept of translation is crucial in this regard. As the prefix ‘trans-’ indicates, there is a border, an obstacle, an impediment to be overcome, requiring a dedicated stepping over/beyond/across. These actions are cumbersome, but in my view imperative. The emphasis on ‘sameness’ in the social sciences is in this regard ill-advised, as it prevents the development of an increased proficiency in translational skills. As a constructive means of engaging with difference, I hold that such skills are of seminal importance to the ‘postcolony’, its diverse societies and disparately individuated members. Inasmuch as difference amounts to a construction, its deconstruction may be a meaningful strategy. However, I posit that the complex nature of difference as a constitutive force in systemic relations is not sufficiently appreciated in this approach. In order to develop a more apposite and enabling epistemology of ‘difference’, the next section is devoted to systems and complexity theory.

## 2. Reflections on ‘difference’ from a systems and complexity perspective

Systems theory developed concurrently in many different fields of study such as biology, physics and the neurosciences. It was especially



invigorated by the work of biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who recognised the ‘system’ as a new scientific category in comparison to a previously predominating ‘elementalistic approach’. (von Bertalanffy 1969: 252). Noting that ‘similar general principles’ would apply in systems in various scientific fields (Bertalanffy 1969: 259) lead to his proposal of a General Systems Theory in 1947. On the one hand, this was decisively motivated by the quest for a unified scientific method, applicable in many different disciplines. (Bertalanffy 1969: 88). On the other, it allowed for an investigation of organisms and life beyond previous mechanistic and vitalist definitions, suggestion that ‘life’ – viewed as a complex system – could be better understood by studying the *organisational relationships* of its constituent parts rather than the *physical substances* of these parts. This shift from observation of the particle to that of systemic relationships has since entered all the so-called life sciences. Currently, one may safely state that slowly but surely the systems view is replacing the atomistic, mechanistic (Newtonian) world view.<sup>9</sup> Evidently, the universe is no predetermined clockwork, but a complex self-organising network.

From a systems theoretical perspective, *difference* manifests and abounds everywhere. Complex systems can be discerned on all conceivable levels, from the single atom to galaxies and the universe itself. It is believed that complex systems – understood as conditions for the *relational organisation of parts* – give rise to the very notion of ‘possibility’. They are the ‘stuff’ that everything is ‘made of’, whereby ‘stuff’ should not be understood in a material sense and ‘made of’ should more precisely read ‘from which everything emerges’. Complexity results from the asymmetrical (non-linear) interactions of heterogeneous parts. There would be no interesting or enabling interaction between parts if such parts were homogenous and thus simply symmetrically (directly, linearly) related. Without difference, diversity, variance of systemic parts, nothing substantial or enabling would exist, as there would be no base for complex interactions. Paul Cilliers (2010: 54) classically formulated it thus: “Diversity is not a problem to be solved; it is the precondition for the existence of any interesting behaviour.”

9 An excellent, concise overview of these developments in the natural and social sciences is given by Robert Geyer in *Europeanisation, complexity, and the British welfare state* (2003).

Difference can be understood as *resource* (Cilliers 2010: 15) in the sense that it provides the necessary resilience to allow reacting and adapting to changing environmental conditions, but also in the sense of generating *meaning* and, by implication, *identity*. Cilliers (2010: 56) described it thus:

For something to be recognizable as being that something, it must be possible to differentiate it from something else [...] The more differences there are, the more distinctions can be made. Meaning is the result of these distinctions, of the play of differences.

Complying to systems logic, this view fully reverses the conventional understanding of some kind of ‘essential characteristic’ or ‘a priori identity’ belonging to something on its own, and instead postulates that meaning and identity are ‘determined relationally’ (Cilliers 2010: 57, referring to Saussure’s theory of language). It might be helpful to relate this finding to the scientific insight that the difference between organic and inorganic matter is not located in any difference of substances (for at the base of either the same elements are found), but in the relational organisation and interaction of these substances. Cilliers (2010: 57) explains that “[t]he sign is a node in a network of relationships. The relationships are not determined by the sign, rather, the sign is the result of interacting relationships.” It might not be judicious to extrapolate this finding of *sole relationality* wholesale into the cultural or sociological sphere. The origin of human individuality and, by implication, that of societal, organisational, or cultural identity cannot be understood without reference to history. Yet, even in this instance relational influences and interactions are far more significant than enlightened modernist notions of independent, self-sufficient and self-emanating individuality would generally admit.

Crucial to the notion of difference is the acknowledgement of *boundaries*. The statement quoted earlier – “for something to be recognizable [...] it must be possible to differentiate it from something else” (Cilliers 2010: 56) – also implies the existence of boundaries enabling distinction and differentiation. Systems as wholes must also be *bounded* (not *closed*) for the sake of their integrity and functionality. Subtle distinctions exist between the notions of ‘open’, ‘closed’ and ‘bounded’. Complex systems are open as far as interactions with their environment are concerned, but bounded as far as their integrity is concerned. Both properties exist concurrently. If a system were

radically open, “the play of difference [would be] potentially infinite. No meaning could emerge, since the deferral would be absolute” (Cilliers 2010: 58). Thus, the limiting and constraining effect of boundaries in fact functions as a constitutive property. In other words, “complex systems have structure” (Cilliers 2010: 58). This is not to be understood in a rigid sense, but rather as an interrelated ‘play’ of complex interactions, constraints, reverberations, feedbacks and emergences. While a complex system will test, challenge and possibly even change its structure, it will all the while depend on its very structure, which will prevent it from falling into random or chaotic activities.

The difficulty of describing the intriguing constellations of complex systems resides in the truly enigmatic and evasive nature of systemic relationships. Mutually constitutive conditions, hidden feedback loops and the very nature of ‘enabling constraints’ make it impossible to determine clear-cut hierarchies of cause and effect. Any attempt at defining or even describing a complex system can only be provisional. By definition, ‘complex’ – always and irreducibly – means ‘a little more complex’.

It is important that *difference* should not be confused with *opposition* and the associated notions of conflict, competition, or the implicitly understood goal of resolving the uncomfortable tension arising from such a contradictory relationship. Rather, difference is necessary as a constant ‘measure’ (in the double sense of gauging and intervening) by “which the components of the system acquire meaning” (Cilliers 2010: 9). Just as difference has no ontological *a priori* existence but can only be determined negatively, as it were, by comparison, it cannot ‘give’ meaning, but contributes towards something meaningful by ‘constraining’ random elements. Meaning is thus gradually ‘built up’ by ‘taking away’ the meaningless. The more constraints accumulate, the richer the meaning. Cilliers (2010: 59) formulates this as follows:

*A collection of differences* is required to narrow down what is completely open to something that has an identifiable meaning [... These relationships do] not determine the meaning, or part of the meaning, in any way. Since they are relationships of difference, they can only minutely indicate part of *what the meaning is not*, and thereby place a little constraint on the meaning of the relevant component. The meaning of a component at a specific point in the history of the system is, therefore, that which satisfies all the current constraints

placed on it through all its relationships in the current context [...] (my italics, HH).

A meaningful concept of *identity*, therefore, depends on a dynamic process of negotiating *relations of differences* within a pertaining systemic context. Neither identity nor difference should be understood as essential qualities contained within a subject. Rather, both emerge from the interactions and relationships of their subjects. This does not reduce the subject to a mere passive, hapless, externally influenced 'condition'. Quite to the contrary: all its components are constitutive to the character and identity of the system resulting from their interactions, albeit in a reflexively constrained manner. It does, however, imply a certain degree of interdependence determined by the respective exposure to every other component. This also translates as a propensity for change and adaptation.

In conclusion, the key concepts from the outlined systemic framework can be applied to the heterogeneous South African cultural environment as follows:

- The organisational forces of a system create conditions for the mutually constitutive coexistence of diverse components precisely by using the given disparateness to strengthen the creativity, resilience and sustainability of the whole/system. This resonates with the political programme cited earlier from the South African Constitution.
- Emerging from relational as well as historical conditions, difference should be regarded and employed as opportunity, agency, wealth and resource.
- Endowed with a rich cultural diversity, there is no lack of 'interesting behaviour' and novel cultural possibilities in South Africa.
- Different positions are not meant to eliminate or 'question' each other through their interactions, as this would reduce the strength, integrity, resilience and creativity of the whole. The challenge is rather to establish relationships that not only acknowledge and accommodate, but also strengthen respective positions, which are held to complement, shape, influence and enrich one another, ultimately allowing for transformation and growth.

- Acknowledging and relating – instead of underplaying and silencing – a wide range of expressions and positions (histories/heritages/narratives) will generate more meaningful interactions. Instead of evoking or working towards a single grand narrative, this strategy promises extended possibilities of apposite and functional artistic responses.

### 3. Outlining a methodology of cultural translation

Having shortly explored difference and diversity, I now turn my attention to the notion of *unity*. Complementing my approach to difference, I introduce ‘unity’, in this instance, not in reference to notions of integration or amalgamation, but rather to indicate a sense of completeness, wholeness, inclusiveness of all members or participants and an appreciation of the mutually shared conditions of existence. Viewed thus, ‘unity’ depends on difference. Shared conditions of existence entail geographical and historical contexts. In addition, they also draw on specific perceptions, interpretations and cultural responses to place and history. Varied cultural responses will afford a more nuanced reading of shared conditions and, in principle, allow for a greater diversity in possibilities of inhabiting them. However, as can be deduced from complexity principles, different cultural responses will simultaneously constrain one another, interact antagonistically and, by doing so, negotiate and establish the characteristic identity of the systemic whole. By virtue of the shared conditions of existence, all components are systemically bound. They exist and gain their meaning through the relations of their differences. From this perspective, cultural translation could be described as the process of consciously acknowledging, actively probing and deliberately deepening these already existing relationships. This kind of engagement is not about *originating* relations but rather about actively *responding* to possibly hidden, but already existing relationships, in an effort to explore and employ them in a mutually beneficial manner.

The process of translation is not supposed to change the message or its recipient. Perhaps its foremost purpose is to connect with the ‘Other’ so that it will be possible to communicate in a meaningful manner. In this sense, it amounts to the opposite of interfering, patronising or proselytising the other – which seemed to be the

instinctive responses whenever human beings have historically been confronted with difference. While all the latter interactions are patently unidirectional, the process of translation implies two-way communication that ideally broadens understanding on both sides. In addition, any form of cultural translation must remain provisional and, in that sense, incomplete. This is not to say that such efforts are impossible, but to acknowledge the complex nature of such undertakings as exploratory, preliminary and provisional (Preiser 2010: 269). The process must, therefore, remain open to amendment and correction and will, by its very nature, be an ongoing project. Its temporality renders it unsuitable for formulaic application or finite archival documentation, but requires an ongoing active custodianship – in other words, a consciously contextually responsive way of life.<sup>10</sup>

Introducing a complex musical reference, the next section outlines the approaches and procedures of *performance practice* as a framework or even methodology for the delicate task of cultural translation.

### 3.1 Permutations of performance practice

For the purpose of my argument I refer to the *period performance* movement,<sup>11</sup> which – since its tentative beginnings in the 1950s and gaining momentum in the 1980s – has become an influential school of thought and practice, thoroughly redefining the perception and interpretation of European music. In contrast to the gradual decline of contemporary art music as a socially meaningful and effectually communicative medium, the twentieth century has witnessed an ever-increasing interest in historical music.<sup>12</sup> However, efforts appropriately to decipher and perform ancient musical scores revealed a principal problem: fully irreconcilable discrepancies between prevailing (current) and dated (historical) performance conventions. Whereas composition and performance were previously perceived as inseparable, complementary aspects of a unified artistic act, it

10 The analogies between the imperative for modes of sustainable living with regard to sensitive ecosystems and that of living appropriately in a culturally diverse environment, are striking.

11 Often also referred to as 'Early Music revival' (Haskell 1988).

12 I suspect that these diametrically opposed yet closely correlated developments are intricately related to each other – a postulation which awaits its detailed investigation.

is now clear that such a unity can only be maintained in the case of contemporary music, where composers and performers share the same idiomatic resources, or where both tasks may even be effectuated by the same person. Any performance of historical music, however, requires a significant degree of investigation into the conventions informing its source (text or script), as well as pertaining performance conventions (style and method), before a meaningful interpretation (reading or re-enactment) can be attempted. Prior to the availability of mechanical sound recordings, the unwritten conventions required for the performance of 'earlier' music (anything older than a living generation) amounted to fully severed and lost performance traditions. Only through painstaking attempts at reconnecting to the intangible aspects of known traditions have we become aware of the degree to which idiomatic performance conventions are intricately linked to historical and geographical contexts and, given their ephemeral nature, their susceptibility to constant and even dramatic change. This must be regarded as one of the prime achievements of the pioneers of the Early Music movement.

The use of *period instruments* provided valuable information during this process of discovery. As contemporaneous evidence in addition to scores and treatises, they provided first-hand information on original physical conditions such as sound, texture, colour, dynamic balance and tuning, idiomatic characteristics as well as technical possibilities and limitations. The newly discovered mutualism between compositional styles and period instruments (as their complementary sound-producing tools) proved so compelling that it opened a hitherto obscure field of specialised investigations based on the rediscovery and reinterpretation of lost or forgotten musical works. The restoration of historical instruments and the growing demand for players, who could proficiently perform on them, boosted the development of historical playing techniques, resulting in new and more detailed insights into specific questions of performance practice. Coinciding with the opportunity to apply the sonic qualities of ancient instruments, concerted efforts at decoding notational conventions of ancient scores transformed these into legible ciphers for meaningful musical expressions once again. Practical experience and theoretical evidence complemented each other so neatly that

overt claims to “historical authenticity” were enthusiastically made – and believed (Haynes 2007: 43).

In the ensuing, consolidating phase these claims evoked severe criticism, emphasising yet another previously disregarded aspect of musical performances.<sup>13</sup> This was the insight that any performance – no matter how contextually ‘informed’ – could nevertheless only be a contemporary and temporary (a current and provisional) contribution to the debate about reading and interpreting texts. Nicolas Harnoncourt (1989: 25) has repeatedly emphasised this point: “It would be absolutely senseless to [...] perform ‘early music’ from the point of view of musicologists or musical archivists. We are contemporary living musicians, not scholars of antiquity”. Similarly, Richard Taruskin (1995: 102) claims “that ‘historical’ performance today is not really historical; [...] a specious veneer of historicism clothes a performance style that is completely of our own time, and is in fact the most modern style around”. Still, far from debunking the notion of *historical* evidence informing *current* performances, these insights only highlight the fact that both aspects are intrinsically linked and ultimately cannot be separated. They articulate the systemically bound conditions and thereby delimit the space in which HIPP is useful. It is concerned with a contemporary reading of historical evidence, retranslated (performed) into a musical argument of just as much appeal, credit or currency as any other contemporary artistic expression.

As such it offers a striking demonstration of what Grebe (2010: 108) calls the “negativity” of complex systems:

No element in a complex system has a positive identity; each element is relationally constituted through its relationships with other elements. Similarly, the ‘identity’ of the system as a whole is an emergent property: it is constituted through the differential

13 The most vociferous criticism in this regard has been that of Richard Taruskin, notably in *Text and act. Essays on music and performance* (1995). The ‘authenticity criticism’ has, however, not disqualified HIPP endeavours, as some believe. On the contrary, it has helped the movement mature into a truly seasoned and complexly reflected, almost deconstructionist approach of finding or negotiating a legitimate middle ground between textual evidence and performative authenticity.



relationships of its elements and neither the elements nor the system has a positive or final identity.

What he states about the consequences arising from this, is most helpful to read and relate specific historical as well as cultural conditions, while concurrently emphasising the notion of ‘translation’: “This negativity at the heart of complexity [introduces] a temporal dimension [...] that allows us to conceive of systemic change in a sophisticated way” and negates systemic closure “by the recognition of an ‘outside’ that is more than a mere environment, but is what holds the potential for the radically new” (Grebe 2010: 108). By definition, HIPP resonates with Derrida’s “constitutive outside” (Grebe 2010: 109), whereas the outside may refer to temporal, spatial, idiomatic or cultural dimensions.

After a dynamic evolution of sixty years, I would argue that HIPP has matured into a sophisticated method of perceiving music from a complexity perspective. As such it offers any musician vast resources of historical, performative and interpretational evidence to practise his/her profession in a contextually aware and deliberately communicative fashion. It is no longer the sole domain of specialists for Early Music. I am suggesting, in this instance, that – subscribing to Geyer’s (2003: 7) “complexity paradigm” on the musical front – HIPP, more than any other approach, probes the conditions under which musical expressions can remain credibly human, relevantly communicative and contextually responsive/responsible in the face of continuously changing idiomatic, stylistic as well as contextual parameters.

### 3.2 Extending and applying HIPP to the task of cultural translation

Parallels exist between this reading of HIPP and the task of cultural translation. As in the case of historically remote music, the challenge of cultural translation lies in gaining access to unfamiliar instances of lost, interrupted, or foreign cultural expressions for which no (or only incomplete) references, contextual information, or idiomatic congruencies exist. Difficulties include differences in the frames of reference and the agendas of investigators and informants. Ethical restrictions – while, in principle, understandable – often complicate

the process of actually acquiring information and gaining access to indigenous knowledge. In addition, the manner of enquiry always determines the findings, inevitably making the process more subjective than most practitioners would like to admit. The process of interpreting collected data is even more subjective.<sup>14</sup> Yet it is interesting that, with regard to authenticity and the interpretation of scores and laws, Taruskin not only defends, but adamantly advocates the subjectivity of such processes of what he calls “social mediation”. Replacing “works of art” in the following quote with ‘translations’, allows us to read the implications of this stand for the principle of ‘translation’:

All works of art are subject to social mediation. It is, indeed the price of living. Social mediation is what renders works of art intelligible, [...] what gives them continuing relevance. And social mediation inevitably changes what it mediates. There can be no appeal to a higher authority [...] (Taruskin 2009: 449).

As the final stage of musical ‘translation’ between cultures, performance is the most complex task in the process. In the widest sense, this may mean re-enacting, reconstructing, reinterpreting, assimilating, absorbing, commenting, criticising, parodying, or merely using the original as a point of reference or point of departure for something fully different or new. No amount of information can replace the imperative for inventive creativity. The goal is not to copy or replicate, but to respond and to build a spacious and accommodating relationship enabling of mutually enriching encounters. HIPPP performances have become so compellingly popular because of this creativity of approach, not because of perceived fidelity to historical examples. Yet the creative process remains stimulated (and to a certain degree concurrently constrained) by historical considerations, ideally merging and marrying the objectives of textual and personal authenticity. I would argue that the measure for successful cultural translations (as well as processes of enculturation or intercultural engagements) lies in attaining this kind of balance: assisting both sides to get acquainted, speak, share, interact, yet concurrently acknowledging the importance of personal integrity and discretion.

14 Of course, a similar situation holds true for all historical studies, as these are by their very nature constructs from specific hindsight perspectives, irrespective of how much they are based on empirically verified observations.

All along, these polarities describe provisional, negotiable positions rather than rigidly fixed standpoints.

#### 4. An intercultural musical project as exemplary ‘trace’ of translation

I now return to *The songs of Madosini* to apply the propositions developed earlier. In doing so, I embrace Brett Pyper’s suggestion to regard new music works and performances as “arguments, rather than monuments”.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, *The songs of Madosini* poses questions rather than celebrating a cultural *status quo*. The work demands a different kind of response than mere acclaim or critique; it is, in fact, intended as a contribution to a debate.<sup>16</sup>

By their very nature, trans-, inter- or cross-cultural works cannot but be experimental. I apply the term not in the *avant-garde* sense, but to indicate the operational space in the societal and cultural fabric that has to be defined and claimed anew for each occasion. By virtue of being intercultural, such works almost inevitably become interdisciplinary, having to fulfil many disparate demands. In the following paragraphs I will use *The songs of Madosini*, to elucidate, *pars pro toto*, my approach to this field in the last decade. I conclude with a description (and part analysis, part critical reflection) of the composition of *The songs of Madosini*.

Specifically requested as a work for a ‘classical western’ concert, the stated intent of the commission and prime objective of this composition was to facilitate the immediate and integral involvement of a South

15 Brett Pyper, contribution to roundtable debate, SASRIM Conference, Grahamstown, 23-25 June 2011.

16 Such a debate hardly takes place in South Africa’s musical profession, where discourse is structured around rigidly upheld positions, often enforced by historical and institutional structures. An example of such a continuing impasse derives from the widespread anxiety to defend and supposedly ‘safeguard’ canonical mainstream ‘celebrations’. This anxiety upholds an almost impenetrable barrier between performers (acting as custodians of the old values) and composers and musicologists (by definition concerned with new values or approaches), who automatically become stigmatised by this oppositional arrangement. In an effort to escape from such a deadlock, the very activity of composing must necessarily entail ceaseless attempts to reinvigorate this debate. In this sense, writing this article may be viewed as part of an overall process of composing.

African musical personality deeply steeped in one of the country's indigenous musical traditions. Latozi Mpahleni, *alias* Madosini, was an ideal choice in this respect. From the very outset, the challenge of creating a format that could accommodate a number of seemingly incongruent elements, loomed large. First, the occasionally *casual* style of Madosini's renditions had to be reconciled with the conventional *formality* regulating concert halls. Secondly, aurally transmitted and *improvised* songs had to be penned<sup>17</sup> and positioned in a *written* score. Thirdly, characteristic aspects of *indigenous performance practice* had to be respected, yet aligned to generic performance conventions such as exact tuning, cuing and precisely synchronising entries in the style of Western chamber music-playing. In addition, following conventions of the 'composed' work, subsequent renditions had to follow the same procedures.

However, accommodating the different time perceptions inherent in the two respective musical idioms was the biggest compositional challenge. Madosini's music is based on a concept of *cyclically captured time*, expressed in constantly recurring circling patterns (celebrating the ever so slightly nuanced variation of an essentially unchanging thought or statement), while my style is derived from musical and dramatic progressions based on goal- and climax-seeking developments, following a *linearly escaping time*. Could our respective modes of expression, based on such divergent musical procedures and purposes, be assimilated meaningfully? What exactly would we be saying? How effectively could we do this? And to whom would we speak?

#### 4.1 Reflections on the composition's reception

The overt reconciliatory gesture of *The songs of Madosini*, symbolising intercultural collaboration, emphasising an unexploited sector of the nation's musical inheritance, and tunefully demonstrating the possibility of a more or less harmonious co-existence, was immediately understood by critics and audiences, and accordingly hailed or condemned, depending on the respective vantage points. However, the much more important musical and, by implication, cultural or political implications of the endeavour were not articulated in

17 Literally 'locked in' by 'writing down'!

reception, thereby placing the work's implicit argumentative proposals on hold, if not even rendering them invalid.

It is important, in this instance, to understand that conventionally a 'musical work' is considered complete once it leaves the compositional sphere and enters the public domain. I subscribe to a different notion of 'completeness'. The composer 'only' supplies a script (no music sounds as yet), the performers 'only' render this audible (no communication guaranteed as yet), while the purpose of this combined effort only 'comes together' once a listener is initiated into this process and hears, understands and signifies that this has happened. Only then will the constitutive circle of all participants required in "this holy triangle", as Benjamin Britten (1964: 122) called it, be closed. If a work is not heard, or if its audience merely sits through a performance without 'getting it', the compositional process cannot be completed. However, at this stage, this is no longer the composer's task; the obligation now rests with the audience and dedicated performers to assist them in the process. History shows that it often takes a few centuries before the task is completed. In the case of *The songs of Madosini*, the reception of the work suggests that the composition was never 'completed'.

This is not to say that the work was not received well. Generally, *The songs of Madosini* would evoke a mixture of curiosity and sympathy in concerts, even eliciting overtly enthusiastic responses, especially with regard to Madosini's performances and her stage presence.<sup>18</sup> The number of invitations for repeated performances over an extended period of time is a further indication of its continual appeal. However, in spite of warm responses, a reluctance to accept the implicit postulates of the work remained palpable. The momentary ovations in celebration of the rich and diverse material – without which no exuberantly festive performances of this nature could occur – ironically emphasised the prevailing disregard for the very same richness of diversity in its everyday, not-so-glamorous and unaccommodated existence. The enthusiastic acclamations in the concert hall somehow rang hollow in view of the absence of substantial engagement with the underlying issues, to which the work and its performances wished to refer. In

18 A review of a performance at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in 2008 stated: "Madosini's expressive and poignant interpretation, which to her credit retained elements of rural abandon within the concert hall setting, added an element of penetrating beauty to the performance" (Brukman 2008).

*The songs of Madosini* an exceptional indigenous voice (Madosini) was calling for the continued practice and appreciation of a unique but marginalised form of musical expression. Listeners waxed lyrical about the hauntingly beautiful sonorities of her instruments or their unsuspected ‘chamber music qualities’. Yet, to date, no one has in earnest followed up on Madosini’s deepest wish to convey her knowledge and skills to a younger generation of musicians. No call has been forthcoming to recruit her abilities to facilitate a connection between uprooted township children and their ancient traditions and heritage. Institutionally, this musical practice remains destitute in South Africa.

Similarly, critique of the composition for the most part commented on technical issues but did not penetrate into deeper, contextual questions. On the positive side, the composition was commended for its effective blending of colours and textures, otherwise associated separately with either Western or African instruments.<sup>19</sup> From a more critical position, concern was raised about the imminent danger of patronising Madosini and of expounding differences between African and European music in an essentialist manner.<sup>20</sup> Assessed from cultural, anthropological, South African and my individual artistic and biographical position, I hold that praise and criticism of *The songs of Madosini* missed the point. While the work is, of course, not beyond justified criticism, critique never moved beyond narrowly focused surface concerns. That which I held to be important, namely the development of a whole new musical genre – a musical endeavour of prime importance in times of far-reaching demographical and cultural reshuffling – was never discussed. I hoped for different questions in response to *The songs of Madosini*. Why, in spite of culturally heterogeneous contexts, are such collaborations still viewed as utterly exceptional? Why does a work of this nature remain the oddity in current South African concert programmes, while Rachmaninov piano concertos or Tchaikovsky symphonies (as examples of very

19 “On the few occasions where the two styles do motivically merge the interplay between the uhadi, umrhubhe and isitolotolo, and the Western cello, clarinet and viola, there were sensitive moments of musical poetry with the performers revelling in the textural interaction of the score” (Brukman 2008).

20 Verbal communication during a colloquium at the International Viola Congress, Stellenbosch, 27 July 2009.

popular, but – from a local vantage point – extraordinarily exotic works) are continuously being presented as normative? South Africa deserves a balanced, embedded and meaningfully related culture of musical representations, referencing both local and global narratives. While the hybrid form of *The songs of Madosini* might not as yet have struck a conclusive formula to this effect, I had hoped that its very presence and nature should have raised pertinent questions about cultural translation in a constructive manner.

## 4.2 Composition as a translational process

As mentioned in the introduction, my collaboration with Madosini was greatly facilitated through the mutual trust we were fortunate enough to establish from the very beginning.<sup>21</sup> I believe that this was grounded in, and continuously verified through our shared interest in her music. While Madosini would often mock me jokingly for my incessant curiosity, she was evidently pleased with my responsive appreciation of very specific details, contextual implications and intricate nuances of her music. In my opinion, this phase was a very purposeful and revealing study of a veteran musician's personality revealed through a uniquely individual musical idiom and associated performance conventions. I transcribed several of Madosini's songs in an attempt at deciphering or capturing something of these very intimate emanations, 'rewriting' them into idiomatically familiar syntax as an initial step of procuring material to be spun or woven into relational, communicative, connective threads.

In this instance, the words 'transcription' and 'translation' may be used interchangeably, signifying a *transitional* process during which certain qualities will inevitably be lost, while unwanted others might

21 Many people were also crucial in facilitating the project. Robert Brooks, in his capacity as founder, director and visionary of the ICMF, must be credited as initiator of the composition, commissioning the work for the opening gala concert of the 2002 ICMF (International Classical Music Festival, since renamed to MIAGI, as the acronym for *Music Is A Great Investment*). Pedro Espi-Sanchez first introduced me to Madosini. Don Ainslie accompanied me on my first visit to her apartment in Langa and assisted during our initial conversations, translating between Madosini's 'deep' Xhosa and my English. Later, Madosini's niece, Nocauwe, would translate and also assist Madosini during performances, before the musician Sindi Mtimkulu became our regular agent and performance associate.

unwittingly be added. Madosini's music and the narrative of her life, as it emerged from our continuous conversations, began to display a remarkable cohesion. This should perhaps not be surprising, as the majority of her songs are occasional music in the most specific sense of the term, typically originating from real biographical experiences and thus portraying a lifestyle in which music is firmly ingrained into the activities and the fabric of everyday life. Recognising this deep connection led me to incorporate a narrator into the performance and treat the verbal rendition of biographical notes, translation of lyrics and other commentary as an integrated, complementary element of the score. Subsequently, this became the decisive factor determining the overall form: the work would be shaped in the manner of an epic, the selected songs referring to specific episodes. The idea of cyclical time, resulting from the ever-recurring patterns in Madosini's music, would reinforce the seemingly 'time-less' (epic) qualities of a premodern experience of temporality. Juxtaposed to this and subscribing to Western notions of linearly proceeding developments, my music would provide dramatic incisions, commentaries and interruptions, prompting and propelling the overall dramatic progression of the work. My composition was designed to function as a mediating frame, reconciling the informally improvisatory nature of the local music with the strict conventions of an internationally orientated classical concert, thereby offering Madosini the opportunity to let her music manifest and unfold on its own terms in a 'culturally reserved' space where this could otherwise not have happened in a purposeful manner.

Despite the importance of the different respective functions, stylistic distinctions between the two principal musical idioms are not altogether rigid. Over the course of the work these distinctions become increasingly blurred, as both sides begin to imitate, mirror and immediately react to the other's expressions. The penultimate movement invites all performers to join forces in a mutual performance of a praise song. In the very last movement the dramaturgic development takes a self-reflexive twist, pondering the precariously vulnerable state of indigenous music. The narrator steps forward and addresses the audience directly:



I am Madosini from Libode. I have told you about my music. My story is finished. (*Ibali lam liphelile. Phela phela ngantsomi.*)

‘Weed, old woman – you that always complain that no-one plants for you! You must do some weeding!’

I have done what I could. I can do no more. I have planted my songs: if they have fallen into your hearts, I will be happy, if you will let them grow there [...].

‘Yes, you, old woman, I mean you. You complain so much, that you have not seen what has happened in the meantime: everything you wanted has been planted for you [...] Ai, ai, ai – you must bring your part as well.’

I have played you my music. It is soft and very quiet. It needs your ears to come to be! It needs your care, not to be smouldered by indifference. It needs your hearts, to grow strong [...]

‘Iyhu! If only you would do some weeding, those mealies would be growing so nicely ...’.<sup>22</sup>

There is no need, the narrator tells us, to lament the loss of indigenous music. All that is required to safeguard it, is to simply lend it an ear: appreciating its unassuming nuanced expressions, and giving it deserved attention among all other musical emanations so readily occupying the contemporary music consumer’s sole attention.

## 5. Conclusion

It is on this level that *The songs of Madosini* finally intends to convey a (political) message of much greater importance than that of its apparent reconciliatory gesture. This message is not located in the propagation of any ideology or political programme, but in the demonstration of the possibility of *establishing complexly meaningful relations across and by means of their differences*. In terms of complexity thinking, this may be formulated as facilitating a play of differences from which relational dialogues, the negotiation of meaning and – as an ultimate emergent property – understanding, may emanate, thus transforming strong tensions of difference into strong systemically

22 Narration accompanying the last song of the cycle, *Hlakula ntokazi ublal’luthi awulinyelwa* (Weed, old woman).

bounded identities and ideas. Reciprocal interactions (dialogues) may effect bonds between diverse components, whereby the most interesting 'dialogues' will in all probability take place between the most diverse 'participants'.

I postulate that the composition acts as a form of translation inasmuch as 'its' music assumes the systemic function of acting as catalyst for the kind of interactions spelled out earlier as pertinent criteria. Translation and now, by implication, composition is understood to facilitate interactions in spite of (working within) constraints resulting from differences, to substantiate connections across differences, and to allow for differences to play out and remain strong. Even though it is an open, 'unfinishable' and therefore ongoing task, it nevertheless serves to broaden the understanding on both sides, thereby developing richer identities and ultimately enabling responsibility and responsiveness of all involved parties.

Yet in order to achieve this, the music (translation) needs to be heard and received: The compositional (translational) task requires both an active composer and an active (attentive/receptive) audience. Both the collaboration and the composition stand as examples of how deep-seated wishes, political goals and even constitutional ideals may effectively be substantiated by deliberately embracing and relating difference. Through the simple act of performing music, *The songs of Madosini* - in relation to Madosini's songs - aspire to the intangible quality of *unity in diversity*.

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## Appendix

List of selected intercultural compositions by the author:<sup>23</sup>

- *Kudzumira - Spirit of Mbira* (2009) ca 5', for cello and harpsichord, first performance: Grahamstown, 6 July 2009.
- *Ciacona & Tshikona* (2007) ca 20', for Tshikona Ensemble, kudu horns and orchestra, commissioned by the MIAGI Festival 2007, first performance: Johannesburg, 8 May 2007.
- *MASQUE* (2003-2005) ca 100', an African Opera, Libretto by Ilija Trojanow, commissioned by the National Arts Council and Pro Helvetia premiere: Cape Town, 28 October 2005
- *Southern Nocturnal* (2003) ca 10', for solo guitar, commissioned by Stefan Stiens, first performance: Munich, 9 March 2003.
- *The Songs of Madosini* (2002) ca 35', for Madosini (vocals, uhadi, umrhubhe, isitolotolo), clarinet, string quartet and narrator, commissioned by the ICMF, first performance: Pretoria, 15 August 2002.
- *'Bonjour', dit le renard. 'Good morning', the little prince replied.* (2001) ca. 8', dialogue for two choirs a capella, commissioned by SAMRO for the Grahamstown National Arts Festival 2001, first performance: Grahamstown, 1 July 2001.
- *Silence where a song would ring* (2000) ca 12', setting of /Xam texts, for baritone, violin and percussion, commissioned by the Gasteig Kulturverein, Munich, first performance: Munich, 3 May 2001.
- *Audite Africam!* (1997) ca 25', 'African' suite for string orchestra, commissioned by the Audi Culture Trust, first performance: Neuburg (Germany), 22 June 1997.
- *Ugubhu (rising and falling ... and rising)* (1996) ca 5', vc solo, commissioned by the SAMRO Endowment.

23 More information on these works may be found on the composer's website: <[www.huyssen.de/Worklist.html](http://www.huyssen.de/Worklist.html)>