

# After universalisms: music as a medium for intercultural translation

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Postmodernity is characterised by the fundamentalisation of plurality. As Aleida Assmann (1996: 99) finds, difference is affirmed in the form of deviance, gaps, and radical alterity. Within this intellectual milieu, the acknowledgment of alterity and the acceptance of difference have become foremost ethical claims (Assmann 1996: 99). Appropriating the thought of Goethe, she finds that the emphasis shifts from the embrace of the One to an encounter with the mode of the Two (Assmann 1996: 100). This encounter is marked by awe and surprise, but also by the shrouding of each of the Two as if cloaked in eternal solitude. The question posed in this article is whether Assmann's viewpoints may enhance a reading of a work from the South African art music repertoire, Hans Huyssen's *Ciacona & Tshikona* (2007). Engaging with a broader selection of viewpoints on cultural translation, it is asked whether Assmann's (1996: 99) notion of otherness is a productive context for mediating a meaningful encounter between cultures and whether, as such, it is relevant to an interpretation of Huyssen's work. A speculative interpretation of Huyssen's *Ciacona & Tshikona* reveals that the work is suggestive of a complex heredity being translated into an 'impure' new South African contextuality.

## Ná universalismes: musiek as 'n medium vir interkulturele vertaling

Postmoderniteit word deur die fundamentalisering van pluraliteit gekenmerk. Soos wat Aleida Assmann (1996: 99) bevind, word andersheid deur middel van afwyking, gapings, asook radikale veranderlikheid bevestig. Binne hierdie intellektuele milieu is die erkenning van veranderlikheid en die aanvaarding van verskil 'n primêre etiese aanspraak (Assmann 1996: 99). Deur middel van 'n toe-eiening van Goethe se denke, bevind sy dat die klem gevolglik vanaf 'n omarming van die Een na 'n ontmoeting met die modus van die Twee verskuif (Assmann 1996: 100). Hierdie ontmoeting word deur verwondering en verrassing gekenmerk, maar ook deur 'n omhulling van elk van die Twee asof deur 'n mantel van ewigdurende afsondering. Die vraag wat in hierdie artikel gestel word, is of Assmann se gesigspunte 'n lesing van 'n werk vanuit die Suid-Afrikaanse kunsmusiek-repertorium, naamlik Hans Huyssen se *Ciacona & Tshikona* (2007), mag verryk. Met inagnome van 'n breër seleksie van gesigspunte rondom kulturele vertaling, word daar gevra of Assmann (1996: 99) se idee van andersheid 'n produktiewe postmoderne konteks vir die mediëring van 'n betekenisvolle ontmoeting tussen kulture bied en of dit, as sulks, relevant is vir 'n interpretasie van Huyssen se werk. 'n Spekulatiewe interpretasie van Huyssen se *Ciacona & Tshikona* bring aan die lig dat dit 'n vertaling van 'n komplekse erfenis na 'n 'onsuiwere' nuwe Suid-Afrikaanse kontekstualiteit suggereer.

Prof M Viljoen, Odeion School of Music, University of the Free State, P O Box 339,  
Bloemfontein 9300; E-mail: viljoenM@ufs.ac.za



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In *The translatability of cultures: figurations of the space between*, Aleida Assmann (1996) reflects on the centuries-old history of universalisms which she describes as

... the guiding fictions of western history; myths that have defined images of the self and the other, oriented action in history, supported institutional and political claims, [and] motivated attitudes of aggression and tolerance (Assmann 1996: 85).

Assmann (1996: 98) constructs this historical legacy as a meta-physical ground within which various manifestations of hierarchy, hegemony, privileged positions, and truth claims have over time either been idealistically upheld or vigorously abolished. By reflecting on the historical unfolding of universalisms she comes to the conclusion that, whether sacred or secular, institutional or spiritual, hegemonic or subversive, they all worship the idea of “the One” (Assmann 1996: 98). However, during the decades of the postmodernist turn, “the One” has lost its magical appeal. As Assmann (1996: 99) in this instance argues,

... the dismissal of the regulative ideal of the One is part of the transvaluation of values that is commonly associated with postmodernism. [...] Difference is no longer something that has to be trivialized, tolerated, or violently overcome; it is something that has to be discovered and acknowledged.

Assmann thus suggests that a break with universalist norms has resulted in debates between modernism and postmodernism, of which the recurring themes focus on concepts of essentialism and anti-foundationalism, as well as universalism and relativism. She concludes that, whereas the regulative ideal of “the One” was until recently considered the necessary framework for intercultural translation, within the postmodern climate “we are beginning to realize that it was precisely this ideal that has prevented it” (Assmann 1996: 85). In this regard, she puts forward that:

The period of postmodernity is characterized by the fundamentalization of plurality. Difference is affirmed in the form of deviance, gaps, and radical alterity. Concepts like communication and consensus have become unpopular. Bridges are no longer welcome because they hide abysses and rifts. The acknowledgment of alterity, the acceptance of difference, has become the foremost ethical claim (Assmann 1996: 99).

Appropriating the thought of Goethe, Assmann (1996: 100) ultimately emphasises the differentiation between the concepts ‘embrace’ and ‘encounter’. As she argues:

Embrace is linked to the mode of the One; it implies fusion, unity, extension of the self. Encounter is linked with the mode of the Two; it invokes alterity, surprise, mystery, and awe”. And yet, it is also in the encounter that “each is shrouded in its eternal solitude as in a precious cloak (Assmann 1996: 100).

Against this epistemological background, the question posed in this article is whether Assmann’s viewpoints may enhance a reading of a work from the South African art music repertoire, Hans Huyssen’s *Ciacona & Tshikona* (2007). Engaging with a broader selection of viewpoints on cultural translation, it is asked whether Assmann’s (1996: 99) notion of otherness is a productive postmodern context for mediating a meaningful encounter between cultures and whether, as such, it is relevant to an interpretation of Huyssen’s work. From this follows that Huyssen’s translation between different musical ‘worlds’ is also considered an act of authenticity or ‘truthfulness’.

‘Translating’ between the structural elements of the centuries-old Italian version of the *ciacona* and the *Tshikona*, the Venda national dance and its most important form of communal music, Huyssen’s *Ciacona & Tshikona* was composed with the explicit aim of introducing an artistically viable mode of cultural interaction. As the composer states in his programme notes (Huyssen 2007), on the one hand, the composition

[...] relies on a Western orchestra to comply to the preemptory demands of a concert situation, in which it is expected of the music itself to contain and carry all procedural events, while the audience may participate only passively. This becomes possible through the assemblage of highly sophisticated instruments, each of which can render a wide range of different pitches and individual colours and thereby sustainably shape music in a versatile, dramatic, narrative and emotionally flexible manner.

On the other hand, it’s essential structural idea, however, is derived from a unique African form of musical expression, which is firmly embedded in the context of a social occasion, where the issues of recurring gatherings, inclusive participation and the repeated affirmation of belonging are predominant.

My interpretation of *Ciacona & Tshikona* attempts to take into account the grey area described by Kevin Korsyn (1999: 55) as “the frontier between text and context”; “the threshold where the individual composition meets the surrounding world”. As Huyssen (2011: 159) recently writes:

I hold that music will always and quite specifically express given characteristics of the society in which they originate. As such they reflect general contemporary of fashionable worldviews, but additionally constitute a valuable means of gathering evidence on often unconscious and otherwise barely tangible preferences, preoccupations or propensities. Music may thus be perceived as a deeply telling indicator of a society’s state and – by implication – of its human concerns.

Departing from this perspective, it is necessary first to contextualise Huyssen’s *Ciacona & Tshikona* in terms of his broader artistic output, as well as in terms of his self-professed compositional philosophy.

As a contemporary South African composer who reflects social consciousness as an essential facet of his work, Hans Huyssen idiosyncratically regards contemporary music as “the period music of our time” (Viljoen 2008: 21). In this regard, the propensity for his work to obscure distinctions not only between the past and the present, but also between different cultural milieus is of particular interest – also for the argument in this article. Understood against the background of Huyssen’s extensive programme notes and other carefully formulated statements, his compositions and, in particular, his most recent works become a viable platform for accommodating a style of composition that, in unique ways, increasingly reflects a focus on multiculturalism within the South African art-music context.

For those familiar with Huyssen’s artistic ideas, his emphasis on the importance of Historically Informed Performance Practice (HIPP) as a most significant movement within Western art music is by now a well-known fact.<sup>1</sup> Yet, while this belief concurs with those of leading

1 Initiated by pioneering figures such as Nicolaus Harnoncourt and Gustav Leonhardt, the Historically Informed Performance Practice (HIPP) movement started in the middle of the last century in Europe. Proponents of the movement based their performances on the study of treatises on early music, playing on the original instruments for which the music was composed. During the past two decades, the movement gained enormous momentum worldwide, impacting also on the world of academic scholarship by way of an ever-increasing body of

international proponents of the movement, Huyssen departs from mainstream HIPP viewpoints in that he strives to reconnect his works with specific historical and geographical roots by emphasising such aspects through meticulously constructed sociocultural contexts. It is his conviction that period performance practice and contemporary composition share the same goal, and that a synthesis of their artistic ideals offers possibilities for responding specifically to the challenges posed by the ‘new’ South African multiculturalism (Viljoen 2008: 21).

In the programme notes for his opera *Masque*, for instance, Huyssen (2005) argues that the importance of the HIPP movement is a rejuvenating and significant revolutionary force within recent developments concerning Western music. In doing so, he emphasises, in particular, the need to adequately structure interpretative contexts relating to music’s many creative, reproductive and receptive dimensions in various milieus – thus broadening from a composer’s point of view questions and challenges that for some considerable time have been giving rise to much debate within the discipline of musicology.

It may be remarked, at this point, that contextuality may considerably enhance any conceptual frame of reference; however, it may also impede it. In the postapartheid re-contextualisation and destabilisation of so-called more ‘disinterested’ frameworks of sociocultural interpretation, for instance, simplified discourses of rainbow nationalism have emerged, on the one hand, and an overemphasis on political content foreground constructs of racial and/or gendered supremacy, victimisation and resistance, on the

literature. In this regard, the influential work of Richard Taruskin (1995: 67) may perhaps be singled out for its emphasis on the fact that authentic performance should always be an “act” and should never be reduced to the status of a “text” – a viewpoint that challenged earlier, more dogmatic viewpoints on what was ‘historically informed’. While in the early days of the movement its performers were perceived to be counter-cultural in that the practices of HIPP built purposely on the equality of its members, and on the avoidance of “traditional” conceptions of “hierarchy” and “virtuosity” to the point of crossing over between professional and amateur modes of performance (Butt 2002: 9), more recent explorations of HIPP demonstrate high levels of skilled musicianship combined with thoughtful yet provocative interpretation.

other.<sup>2</sup> This means that, paradoxically, in some instances scant attention has been paid to the artistic uniqueness and power of expression of the music ‘itself’ in a particular context. It is also ironic that a more rigorous engagement with all the human aspects involved in the creation, performance and reception of local music – a consideration which in postapartheid South Africa significantly influences all interactions of ‘text’ and ‘context’ – is, in many instances, conspicuously absent, while authors seem to rather engage with the implications of apartheid on a more ‘abstract’ level of implication.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of the present article, it is important to ask what the relevance of these matters is for an understanding of Huyssen’s diverse, many-faceted oeuvre,<sup>4</sup> and what implications does his wide-ranging focus on musical contextuality have for a speculative interpretation of his work. In addition, it is necessary to investigate how the compositional ideas underlying *Ciacoma* & *Tshikona* may be understood within the stylistic heterogeneity of his output as a whole, and what artistic and critical potential it possesses within this frame of reference. If one examines the realm of postapartheid aesthetics, in particular, it may ultimately be asked what the work’s significance for local music scholarship is, and what role it has to play within the broader spectrum of current South African art music.

At this point of the argument, let us consider Huyssen’s creative ideals – which the composer expresses with exceptional clarity and conviction – focusing, in particular, on his ideas which impact on notions of cultural ‘translation’. Huyssen’s statement that a concert hall should be neither a museum nor a laboratory sums up his abovementioned approach to contemporary music as “the period

- 2 This is a tendency that characterises a broader scope of postapartheid cultural expression and theorisation. Cf Nuttall & Michael (2000: 2).
- 3 Stephanus Muller’s (2005) book chapter “Queer alliances” may perhaps be cited as a scholarly example. In this regard, it should be noted that this chapter deliberately constructs a politicised context for its narrative account of the lives and contributions of the composers Hubert du Plessis and Arnold van Wyk as situated within apartheid South Africa.
- 4 My gratitude to the composer for making available a selection of scores and recordings for the purpose of this and other articles on his work, and for his willingness, on several occasions, to elucidate on the creative process involved in his compositions, both via email correspondence and via conversations during the period 2004-2008.

music of our time”, and simultaneously sets out conditions which, in his opinion, are essential to a relevant South African form of contemporary composition.<sup>5</sup> In earlier works – for instance, *Audite Africam!* (1997) – his inclusion of African elements may be described as a form of ‘artistic stylisation’ inclusion into an otherwise modernistic Western idiom. However, in his more recent opera *Masque* (2005) and in *Ciacona & Tshikona*, traditional African materials are to a remarkable degree absorbed into the living fibre of the music, not as an attempt at a symbolic cultural ‘outreach’, but as a musical ‘mother-tongue’.<sup>6</sup>

As Huyssen’s focus on contextuality suggests, his oeuvre reflects music as a profoundly social force which means that many of his works – notably his most recent compositions – project an explicitly social (and at times ethical) content.<sup>7</sup>

Huyssen’s work may be grouped roughly into ‘African pieces’, orchestral/ensemble works, chamber music, sacred music, and so-called ‘experitainment’ works. All these divergent forms of musical expression are imbued with an almost tangible sense of the ceremonial – whether they contain the seemingly insignificant day to day rites of mundane practices or more formal grandiose liturgical symbolism. Undoubtedly, this characteristic may be linked to a pronounced literary influence in a considerable number of his compositions. Yet, despite this ‘unifying’ factor and omnipresent compositional ‘fingerprints’ such as linearity and rhythmic complexity, as well as consistently sophisticated levels of compositional craftsmanship, his broader oeuvre defies any definitive stylistic categorisation and any pronouncements regarding an immediately identifiable compositional ‘voice’.

In the context of this article, this aspect of Huyssen’s work warrants some consideration, since it may be argued that it is not only on the creative level of the ‘voice’ that this composer’s compositional philosophy and social conscience meet, but that it is also on this poetic level that processes of ‘translation’ take place.

5 Cf <<http://www.huyssen.de/Biography.html>>

6 Note the influence of Béla Bartók’s philosophy (*cf* Suchoff 1976: 341-4).

7 In this instance, note the influence of Benjamin Britten (1998: 116-23) as propounded in his famous essay “On winning the first Aspen Award”.

In a scholarly essay on ‘the political’ in Shostakovich’s musical language, the philosopher Christopher Norris (1982: 167) underlines the fact that the problem for music criticism lies in explaining concretely how and where the pressures of commitment impinge upon the processes of musical thought. In doing so, he distinguishes between several levels of convention and individuality in what normally counts simply as a composer’s ‘style’. Roland Barthes’s (1967) reflections on literature as being ‘style’ and ‘language’ provide the basis for Norris’s definition of the former as a deeply ingrained habit of expression in current usage within a society, but existing independently of it. Language, however, may be defined as a neutral entity whose reservoir of material provides an artist with limitless possibilities of expression. Accordingly, the artist develops an individual style and content as opposed to a communal ‘style’ in the sense as defined earlier. It is between these two fixed entities, the private and the communal, that literature – or music – has to work out its individual terms of expressive freedom. For Barthes (1967: 20), this occurs within a third dimension which he calls a “mode of writing”, and which might be translated into musical terms as ‘compositional practice’.

As citations of prominent authors in the field of translation studies will demonstrate at a later point in the argument, Barthes’s notion of language as a ‘blind’ or ‘objective’ force is highly debatable, since, as will be stressed, no language (including music) is ever indifferent or immune to ideology. Similarly, processes of translation can never be ‘neutral’ in this sense. But it is certainly true that it is Barthes’s (1967: 20) mode of writing that establishes most tangibly the relationship between creative art and society; a relationship which he describes as “an act of historical solidarity”: “form considered as a human intention and thus linked to the great crises of history”.

Arguably, Huyssen’s intensive involvement with music’s contextuality presupposes an intensely creative preoccupation with what Barthes defines as the “mode of writing”. Yet to assume that this strategic approach deprives a composer of opportunities to construct an effortlessly identifiable individualistic ‘voice’ is to misinterpret the complexity and ambivalence of ‘music as defined by context’. In his various musical (dis)guises, Huyssen’s multiple ‘voices’ are never a compendium of musical heteroglossia where context implies a fluid, borderless intertextuality. Rather, it may be understood as



a mould within specific (and well-specified) 'frames' of expressive uniqueness (or simply: 'contexts'). Without doubt, his general artistic development, culminating in his most recent works, has been closely intertwined with a regular exposure to continents and cultures of a richly diverse nature. 'Thematic' connections between earlier and more recent works ought not to be disregarded. In its use of allegory, its juxtaposition of disparate cultural spheres and time frames, as well as in its subtle allusion to the idea of the 'mask', *Little portrait of the world* (1993), for instance, carries perhaps intrinsically the artistic seeds later brought to fruition in *Masque*.

Although subject to changes and development – in some instances of a radical manner – his oeuvre may be said to represent a kind of identity-construction other than would have been the case if 'style' (in Norris's broader sense) had remained a given, indelible part of a particular compositional 'blueprint', Huyssen's music is suggestive of establishing (at least some) connection between what may be cautiously described as an autobiographical sphere and the demands of his artistic vision. Obviously, it would be clichéd to interpret his output merely according to certain 'themes' derived from real-life experience. Yet a recurring passion in his sacred works is that of suffering – a particularly striking example being *À propos du malheur* (1998) on texts by Simone Weil. 'Thematic' connections between earlier and more recent works ought not to be disregarded. The allusion to the figure of the 'mirror'/'mask' in Oscar Wilde's *The picture of Dorian Gray*, from which passages are quoted in the above-mentioned *Little portrait of the world*, as well as the recurrence of these images in *Masque*, may be noted in this regard. While Wilde's chilling novel is a sharp comment on moral decadence, in *Little portrait* cultural difference is 'mirrored' in an unbiased manner (as is the case also in *Masque*). Yet, in another sense, both works 'reflect' critically on the influence of progress and technology – and thus implicitly comment on globalisation's merciless processes of homogenisation and levelling of difference.

It is thus not only in a more obvious 'autobiographical' sense that Huyssen's oeuvre represents a continuous return to concrete biographical and cultural 'roots', but also by virtue of a continuous exploration of compositional avenues for reconnecting musically to specific origins. While the multifaceted nature of his work discourages any homogeneous reading, it is simultaneously surprisingly accessible

as though the composer were succeeding in keeping his music perceptually ‘simplified’ despite considerable syntactic complexity. Perhaps this is accomplished via his choice of design; perhaps via modes of patterning and repetition that ‘mask’, as it were, tonal and rhythmic intricacy. Arguably, what comes into play in this instance, besides Huyssen’s strong awareness of the structural differences between Western and African music, is his inventive compositional ‘exploitation’, so to speak, of these disparate conceptual models.<sup>8</sup> What results, however, seems to be a ‘communicative aesthetic’ that invites an active listener’s response to a contextual set of expectations which (presumably) might be met, realised or changed for any specific audience or its individual members.<sup>9</sup>

Against this philosophical/compositional background, let us now consider the two forms from which Huyssen derives the title and structure of *Ciacona* & *Tshikona*.

### The *ciacona* and *tshikona*

The *ciacona*<sup>10</sup> is a dance based on variation techniques, though not necessarily ground-bass variation. Most *ciaconas* are in triple meter, and are performed at a fast tempo. They are built up of an arbitrary number of comparatively brief units, consisting of two, four, eight or sixteen bars, each closing with a cadence that leads without a break into the next unit. As Silbiger (2001: 410) observes, structurally, this amounts to an extendibility that allows for the creation of a musical momentum sustainable over a considerable length of time. Simultaneously, formal contrast is often created through large-scale articulation which is effected by means of temporary shifts of mode or key.

8 Cf the composer’s discussion in “Synopsis einiger struktureller Unterschiede zwischen europäischer und afrikanischer Musik” (1998). Presumably Huyssen is drawn both to the more or less ‘structured’ contexts involved in the search for an ‘authentic’ interpretation (in the Period Performance Practice sense), and the unwritten and in some cases unarticulated conventions guiding the performance of traditional African music.

9 Note again the influence of Benjamin Britten who believed that any musical experience requires the close collaboration of composer, performer, and listener.

10 Also *ciacona* (Italian); *chacona* (Spanish); *chaconne* or *chacony* (French).

With a view to my discussion of Huyssen's *Ciacona* & *Tshikona*, I concentrate on the early history of the *ciacona* since, according to the composer's programme notes for the work (Huyssen 2007), it is this wild and sensual aspect of the dance with which he associates the use of the *ciacona* in his composition. As the composer notes, the two forms are suggestive to him of an association which he constructs by way of a speculative etymological connection between early American and African cultures (Huyssen 2007):

It remains to remark on the striking similarity of the old Italian version of Chiacona and Tshikona. Especially, since the first historic record of a chaconne mentions it as 'being a wild and sensual' Mexican dance that was only imported to Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Could this be considered etymological evidence of an ancient connection between American and African cultures? Though of course it remains mere speculation, it is an intriguing thought nevertheless. Exceeding its mere function as incidental music for the opening of the 2007 MIAGI Festival, a coincidental dimension is implied.<sup>11</sup>

According to the *Britannica Online Encyclopedia* (chaconne 2010), the *chacona* was originally a fiery and suggestive dance that appeared in Spain in about 1600.<sup>12</sup> Although examples from this period are no longer extant, writers such as Miguel de Cervantés, Francisco Gómez de Queverdo and Lope de Vega imply a Mexican origin, indicating that the *chacona* was a dance-song associated with servants and slaves (chaconne 2010, Silbiger 2001: 410). Silbiger (2001: 410) notes that these early *chaconas* were

... often condemned for [their] suggestive movements and mocking texts, which spared not even the clergy, and were said to have been invented by the devil. [Their] high spirits were expressed in the refrains that punctuated [their] often lengthy texts, usually beginning with some variant of 'Vida, vida, vida bona/Vida, vámonos á Chacona!'

- 11 The acronym MIAGI stands for "Music is A Great Investment". This creative endeavour, funded primarily by the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund, has, since 2001, hosted an annual international and intercultural festival featuring indigenous South African art music in collaboration with international performers and conductors.
- 12 Cf <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/10414/chaconne>>

(which can be freely translated as: 'Let's live the good life; let's go to Chacona'.<sup>13</sup>

Transferred to Spain and later Italy, where the earliest notations of *ciaconas* originate, these dance-songs often formed part of theatrical productions and *commedia dell'arte* routines, their continued tradition of disreputable texts often resulting in their being banned from the stage (Silbiger 2001: 411).

Having originated among the VhaVenda, a people which came from the Great Lakes of Central Africa whose history dates back to the ninth century, the *tsbikona* is a royal dance generally viewed as the Venda national dance. It is performed on all important occasions such as the installation of a new ruler, the commemoration of a ruler's death, and the sacrificial rites at the graves of a ruler's ancestors (Blacking 1998). Traditionally, the *tsbikona* is a dance performed by males, with each player carrying a pipe made of a special and scarce indigenous type of bamboo.

It is no coincidence that John Blacking's (1973: 50-1) celebrated work on the music of the VhaVenda should also include a focus on the *tsbikona*, since, as Reily's (2006: 6-7) recent appraisal of his research emphasises, for Blacking musicality is an innate human capacity present in all human beings, but in some societies, such as the Venda, the social consequences of 'musicking' is most existential; "in making music together the Venda constituted shared experiences which made them more aware of themselves and of their responsibilities towards each other". Indeed, Blacking's (1973: 50-1) observations on the *tsbikona* compellingly reflect his concern not only for the ethnographical documentation of Venda music, but also for its impact on the communality and on the physical and psychological well-being of the Venda:

*Tsbikona* expressed the value of the largest social group to which a Venda felt he or she belonged. Its performance involved the largest number of people, and its music incorporated the largest number of tones in any single piece of Venda music involving more than one

- 13 Silbiger (2001: 411) indicates that 'Chacona' was either etymologically derived from the word 'chac', which described the sound of the castanets forming part of the traditional *chacona* accompaniment (together with guitars and tambourines), or that it pointed to an unidentified idyllic place near Tampico, Mexico, to which some texts refer.

or two players. *Tshikona* was valuable and beautiful to the Venda, not only because of the quantity of people and tones involved, but because of the quality of the relationships that were established when twenty or more men blew differently tuned end-blown reed-pipes with a precision that depended on holding one's own part as well as blending with others, and at least four women played different drums in polyrhythmic harmony.

### Huysse's *Ciacona* & *Tshikona* (2007)

It is the sociocultural aspect of the *tshikona* as highlighted by Blacking (1973: 50) that Hans Huysse (2007) wishes to emphasise in his composition *Ciacona* & *Tshikona* (2007). In his programme notes for the work, the composer (Huysse 2007) explains that:

For a performance of *Tshikona* one needs a set of drums – Ngoma, Murumba and Muthungwa – and a randomly large number of dancers, each of whom plays a differently tuned reed-pipe. The music is structured in such a way that each participant provides just a single note (one specific pitch repeated in a certain rhythmical pattern) to the overall pattern, which can be compared to a specifically coloured strand within a woven cloth. The resulting texture of such a *one-player-one-note* approach of ensemble playing is a sounding manifestation of a well-coordinated mutual undertaking and as such a conscious symbol of ideal social interaction. It depends on reliable yet humble individual contributions – very much in concordance with the traditional African concept of society, where the emphasis on belonging to a balanced whole always ranks higher than the pursuit of individual liberation.

From this point of departure, let us consider some of the main principles guiding Huysse's *Ciacona* & *Tshikona*. As the composer states:<sup>14</sup>

For one part it relies on a Western orchestra to comply with the peremptory demands of a *concert situation*, in which the music itself is expected to contain and carry all procedural events, while the audience may participate only passively. [...] On the other hand, its essential structural idea, however, is derived from a unique African form of musical expression, which is firmly embedded in the context of a social occasion where the issues of recurring gatherings,

14 Cf his programme notes for the première of the work (2007).

inclusive participation and the repeated affirmation of belonging are predominant (Huysen 2007).

Huysen (2007) further explains that the music based on the first principle sets off with a bass-ostinato in the style of a Passacaglia:

Its recurring variations are grouped into larger sections, which at certain moments open 'windows' onto the other music. It is interesting to note that the Passacaglia or Chaconne – a most important form of early European music – has the constant recurrence of a single short pattern in common with traditional African music. However, European composers have always indulged in the aspect of variation, pursuing formal development by *departing* to various degrees from the original starting point. African musicians, on the contrary, would aptly express their culture's perception of time as a recurring cyclical entity by *persisting* on the repetition of the original material.

In a recently published interview, Huysen states that, after an initial interest in African music which started in Europe in the late 1990s with occasional commissions that requested works with an African content, his increasing familiarity with indigenous African music, which followed on his return to South Africa in 2000, led to close collaborations with local artists through which African contexts could, in fact, be "recreated", and original African materials included in his works were left "unchanged" (Viljoen 2008: 24). However, his commitment to an "inclusive and unbiased approach towards the full scope of South African cultures also resulted in his inclusion of various European art-music traditions – as is indeed the case in *Ciacona* & *Tshikona*. To cite the composer once more:

The next stage of research into African music involved extending the study of solely historical (traditional) exemplifications to include contemporary forms of expression, i.e. to translate traditional styles into meaningful modern artistic contributions. This now implied interfering with strict tradition, reinventing and transferring essential qualities by means of composing new music for old instruments and traditional forces (Viljoen 2008: 24-5).

In the introductory section of this article, Aleida Assmann's (1996: 99) ideas were introduced as relating to the notion of cultural translation. Assmann (1996: 99) argues that concepts of communication and consensus are no longer relevant within the postmodernist sphere since, in her view, such reaching out to the Other only serves to hide abysses and rifts. For Assmann (1996: 100),

it was concluded earlier, the acceptance of difference, as the foremost ethical claim of postmodernism, implies not fusion, unity, or the idea of the Other as an extension of the self; rather, she believes, encounters with alterity should be based on “surprise, mystery, and awe”.

At this point, let us consider Assmann’s idea of translation, so central to the argument in this article, from the angle of Kate Sturge’s (2007) more recent publication *Representing others: translation, ethnography and the museum*. In a postcolonial critique, Sturge (2007: 1) underlines the fact that issues of representation (which she describes as ‘translation’) take place within a web of inequalities. Sturge (2007: 2) bases this argumentation on the fact that “[m]eanings encoded by ethnographic representation are complex, unstable, hybrid; they are born of the contingencies of the receiving system rather than those of the source”.

Thus, in her view, far from being merely a bridge-crossing moment, or an encounter of ‘awe’, translation is a potentially conflictual encounter “central to the interface of cultures in the world, part of ideological negotiations and cultural struggles, a form of intellectual construction and creation, a metonym in the exercise of cultural strength”, and, as she ultimately observes, “a matter of power” (Sturge 2007: 2).

The complexity to which this author seemingly wishes to draw our attention is that the discipline of ethnography needs to steer clear of two imminent dangers: the asserting of ‘untranslatability’, which affirms the impossibility of human communication, and the asserting of total translatability, which implies a ‘universal’ model of understanding, which, in Sturge’s (2007: 24) view, is merely a “local product of the West”. Sturge’s (2007: 27) argument becomes even more compelling when she finds that, since a simple token-for-token exchangeability between languages – to which, in our present interpretative context, we may metaphorically add also the ‘language’ of music – is a cultural impossibility.

From this point of view, even literalism is not neutral. Rather, as Sturge (2007: 27) argues, literal translation, far from being non-interventionist, produces strangeness and distance, and moreover projects a sense of “primitiveness” (Sturge 2007: 28). The gist of her argument is that the emphasising (or, in Assmann’s [1996] terms, the

celebration) of difference is bound to reinforce a hierarchy of power; a hierarchy which she describes as “superior/civilized” over and above “inferior/primitive” (Sturge 2007: 30). This opinion has already been held in the well-known writings of Talal Asad (1995: 326) who points out that translation, of whatever kind, is never a neutral act, and that the process of translation “always involves discrimination, interpretation, appraisal, and selection”.

Let us return at this point to Huyssen’s *Ciacona & Tshikona* for a closer reading of strategies of “musical style and language” (cf Barthes 1967: 20) as deployed in the work, before considering once more the ideas of Assmann and Sturge. The composition, commissioned by MIAGI and premièred in Johannesburg in May 2007, and, at the request of the then Minister of Arts and Culture, Pallo Jordan, once more formed part of the 2008 MIAGI festival in Cape Town in May 2008.

In reflecting on the use of the *ciacona* and *tshikona* in this work, first it is important to note that the two thematic contexts in question (Western and African) are derived from each other and are, therefore, closely interrelated in terms of musical content. Huyssen does not draw on the idea of a *chaconne* that provides a constant harmonic basis for melodic variation; rather, through closely-knit thematic materials he construes a static tonal context centred strongly on the key of A minor. In this instance, fragmented Western tonal elements are ‘captured’ in a circular ‘reinterpretation’ of the *chaconne*, where even the occasional linearity of contrapuntal play is subservient to the powerful circularity of the *tshikona*.

In the *Ciacona* section where no African rhythmic ‘track’ is present (m 167-322), and where more melodic development is presented, the music is still ‘captured’, as it were, in the static tonal context as described earlier. A modernist free tonality, in this instance, forms the basis for contrapuntal playing that develops thematic ideas in a highly linear fashion. Yet, even in this section, so-called ‘Western’ contrapuntal elements are closely derived from *tshikona* elements and presented in what may be described as a ‘circular dance’. African and Western elements and materials constantly overlap, so that materials from the barren pentatonic introduction later on form the basis of the



*ciacona* theme. Thus, ultimately, the materials of the ‘Western’ theme are derived from an African musical basis.

It is interesting to note that, in the formal context thus construed, the *ciacona* is presented as a ground bass only six times throughout the composition as a whole; in all other instances, it is presented melodically. In addition, the composer ends the work with a powerful gesture in A major – a seemingly ‘Westernised’ ending which, once again, may be traced to the pentatonic materials of the earlier heard kudu horns.

It may thus be concluded that in *Ciacona & Tshikona* Huyssen’s ‘translation’ of African materials subverts Westernised musical ‘language’ in that he uses the *tshikona* in its ‘literal’ form, yet ‘impoverishes’ the Western materials in order to ‘translate’ between basically incompatible tonal materials. From the perspective of Kate Sturge’s (2007: 27) earlier cited viewpoint, literalism in this context is indeed not neutral, and certainly Huyssen’s work demonstrates that, also in this specific context, no simple token-for-token exchangeability between languages and cultures is possible. However, what dominates in *Ciacona & Tshikona* is not the Western or ‘universal’ model which would assert, in Sturge’s (2007: 24) terms, the notion of total translatability, but rather the model of the African “Other”.

At this point, let us consider Kevin Korsyn’s (1999) thought on discourses of intertextuality, influence and dialogue, which to me seem relevant to an understanding of Huyssen’s work.

Korsyn (1999: 55) argues that one place that may serve productively for a rethinking of music is “the frontier between text and context, [...] the threshold where the individual composition meets the surrounding world”. He also states that a conceptualisation of text and context as a “stable opposition” results in a “compartmentalization of musical research, dividing the synchronic analysis of internal structure from the diachronic narratives of history” (Korsyn 1999: 55). This kind of dualism results in the analyst being either ‘inside’ the piece, delineating its boundaries through what may be called ‘intramusical’ analysis, or ‘outside’ the piece, where an ‘extramusical’ context is constructed whereby the formal content of the piece is mapped onto sociocultural situations and events, a hermeneutic process that creates meaning.

Korsyn (1999: 55) also states that the problem with binary oppositions of the kind described earlier is “that they create, to cite Jacques Derrida (1982: 329), ‘a hierarchy and an order of subordination’”. In order to suggest an alternative interpretative position which relies on post-structuralist thought, Korsyn (1999: 56-7) argues that the notion of intertextuality radically deconstructs the text/context opposition by creating a context which “invades text” as the content of one text becomes part of another in a single unit of meaning.

Korsyn’s (1999: 55) viewpoint that intertextuality provides us with a deconstructive “invasion” of text by context (Korsyn 1999: 56-7) is suggestive of the fact that in *Ciacona & Tshikona* metaphors of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ become deeply problematic as any idea of ‘unity’ is demonstrably relative and provisional to ‘context’. This relativity of the text is apparent also in the fact that the thoroughly intertextual nature of Huyssen’s musical language furthermore subverts the privileged context of the *ciacona* as historical form (of the West).

Sturge (2007: 2) and Asad (1995: 326) make out a convincing case when they observe that cultural translation always takes place within a web of inequalities, and that it is always a matter of power. However, to read the process of translation simply as a process masking asymmetrical relations of power and sustaining dominant social orders and structures, is to reduce the proliferation of cultural meaning that is inherent in ‘context’. As argued earlier, in the case of Huyssen’s *Ciacona & Tshikona*, potential meanings of the work seem to be born primarily from the contingencies of the ‘receiving system’ rather than from those of the ‘source’. Thus, in this work, Huyssen seems to subtly deconstruct what in Korsyn’s (1999: 70) discourse may be called the “tyranny of the privileged context”. However, his *mode of writing* (cf Barthes 1967: 20) implies a strategy that does not *obliterate* the voice of the ‘One’ in order to make heard the voice of the ‘Other’, but rather engages in intensive intercultural and intertextual ‘dialogue’.

Returning from this perspective to Huyssen’s convictions as a proponent of HIPPP, it may be posited that, as is evident from his treatment of the *ciacona* and *tshikona* in the work under discussion, his compositional philosophies demonstrably imply that he is no supporter of ‘purist’ notions of the movement. Rather, it may be observed in this instance that the composer places the contemporary

reconstruction of early music within the postmodern conceptual space, that he deliberately interferes with tradition, and that it is his artistic objective to reinvent essential qualities of both Western and African music in order to ‘forcefully’ create music to be performed in interactive contexts.

From this point of view, it may be argued that currently the role of historical reconstruction in South Africa is not simply about ‘translating’ between cultures, or about musically defining ‘new’ hybridised local identities. Rather, as Huyssen seems to demonstrate in *Ciacona & Tshikona*, a historically informed artistic practice seems to concern a very specific view on ‘authenticity’ where ‘history’ and geographical location are all part of the ‘context’ which invades ‘text’ – a ‘context’ where a complex heredity is translated into an ‘impure’, ‘new’ South African contextuality where the cultural hierarchy of entrenched senses of self is destabilised. Huyssen’s most recent works – in particular, *Masque* (2005), *Proteus variations* (2006) and *Ciacona & Tshikona* (2007) – are thus suggestive of ways of thinking that – perhaps idealistically – create artistic spaces for both an individual and communal stance *apropos* dissimilar cultural contexts, facilitating a nuanced and diversified record both of ambivalent forms of identification and of active ‘non-identifications’. In this respect, Huyssen may be commended for artistically rejecting oversimplified ‘new nation’ attempts to disguise differing configurations of identity.

In his quest for discovering artistic ‘routes’ that enable a reconnection with deeply embedded ‘roots’, Huyssen’s work thus seems to project identity construction as a continuous process; as continually refiguring itself aesthetically. It may be argued that, as a transformative phenomenon of meaning, his viewpoint, however, challenges postmodernist reconfigurations where the self is fractured and centreless. Intensely self-aware of its indeterminate contextuality, identification in Huyssen’s sense seems to become profoundly conditional – yet loses neither a sense of continuity nor an innate awareness of difference.

Questions of cultural identity are central to the discourses of postapartheid aesthetics and recent local music scholarship. In both instances, essentialised categories of identity need to give way to open-ended conceptions of identity. The pressure to define

only one distinctly 'South African' compositional style, to override aesthetic considerations with political ones, or to deny the right of existence of certain types of music may be viewed as highly politicised, reactionary manoeuvres that, ironically, not only go against the grain of postmodern conceptions of identity, but also potentially deprive South African music of its rich cultural diversity.

From this perspective, there is one final consideration from which the 'rootedness' of Huysen's *Ciacona & Tshikona* may be understood. In the philosophy of art, it is generally accepted that, as a symbolical expression, a work of art may possess what is called 'nominal authenticity', defined as the correct identification and interpretation of its authorship, origins and historical context (Dutton 2003). Authenticity as defined by existential philosophy – by which is meant 'expressive authenticity' – amounts to a socially committed, personal statement of beliefs and values true to one's deepest self rather than to any historical tradition or circumstance.

Ultimately, Huysen's *Ciacona & Tshikona* may be appreciated as an attempt to establish cogent links between these two spheres of 'authentic' expression. As a highly individualist contribution, the further expansion of his already substantial body of work holds special interest for the public awareness of South African art music, functioning as a transformative space for constructing senses of social self that are accounted for in terms of both the present and the legacies of the past. However, it should be borne in mind that such a transformative 'translation' of culture is also a translation of *people*, and therefore, as Sturge (2007) alerts us, continues to disclose problems of power and of intrinsic political meaning. While at this stage of the argument it is evident that Huysen's composition offers a most productive context for theorisation, it may, however, be critically asked whether the process of cultural translation implied by *Ciacona & Tshikona* is not merely a symbolic act which has little bearing on the 'real-life' interaction of the Venda dancers or the Western orchestral players – which, in both cases, have been paid to come together and perform in a thoroughly unnatural, structured artistic context. It may also be critically asked in what respect such music-making in the longer run uproots or destabilises inherited dominant artistic practices within the South African art music concert scene.

Considering finally the questions presented in the introduction to this article, it cannot be denied at this point that Assmann's (1996: 99) view of translation as an encounter of surprise, mystery and awe highlights one aspect of a process of meaning-making that is never neutral (*cf* Sturge 2007). As Huyssen (2011: 159) notes, this is certainly true also for translation through music:

Music never sounds without agency: while it can depict or express anything, it cannot express nothing. Each performer, by virtue of being a person and existing in given political relations, has an agenda, even if she herself would be unaware of it. In the same way that every human action has certain ethical dimensions, so has music; it is never 'innocent'.

However, as Asad (1995: 326) points out, while translation is always biased – to the point of being discriminatory – it does not follow that it is always a crude act of political subversion, or the imperial rendering and domination of another culture – as Sturge's (2007) viewpoint suggests. It should, therefore, be acknowledged that translation, in all its complexity and impossibility, can be meaningful and moving. Layoun (1995: 269-70) finds that

translation can also be the attempt to bear across sometimes fierce divides stories of difference and the foreign that are not necessarily thereby to be eliminated or subsumed. Translation can also be to carry across the challenge or charge of the different, a charge to reconsider our cultural mappings of a putative sameness and difference *and* our practices [...] based on those maps.

From the perspective of such a more redemptive view of translation, perhaps it is no coincidence that Huyssen chose the *tshekona*, firmly embedded in the African context where inclusive participation and the repeated affirmation of belonging are predominant, as the main structuring principle of his composition. Perhaps, ultimately, it is through such a view of translation that the affirmation of the Other is mediated, or, appropriating Derrida's metaphor, is "transfused" (*cf* Bennington 1999: 4).

Yet, as Assmann (1996: 100) also reminds us poignantly through Goethe's metaphor of the encounter ("shrouded in its eternal solitude as in a precious cloak"), translation always implies the selective representation and reinterpretation of the Other, and therefore a unbridgeable "distance" between the Two.

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