

“Listen with open ears, an open heart, and an open mind”

Georg Friedrich Haas on *Morgen und Abend*

*How did your work with the Norwegian author Jon Fosse for *Morgen und Abend* originate?*

Haas: I started working with Jon Fosse around 2004, when Hans Landesmann came to me and said: “Georg, I have two wishes. The first wish is that I would like to hear an opera by you and Jon Fosse. And my second wish is that I will still be around to experience it.” This wish was fulfilled for the first opera, *Melancholia*, but unfortunately not for the second, *Morgen und Abend*.

If I remember rightly, on the evening of the première of *Melancholia*, Fosse suggested the subject of a second opera. I was a little disappointed that he didn’t suggest one of his wonderful dramas about relationships, but instead a story which “only” recounts the birth and death of a Norwegian fisherman. But I trusted Jon Fosse and he wrote a really wonderful and touching libretto for me.

Morgen und Abend is about my future and the future of every person who sees this opera. That forced me to dig deeply from an emotional perspective.

Melancholia and Morgen und Abend are several years apart, but the idea of a

second opera was in the air for some time before that. What happened to this idea during those years?

Haas: With hindsight, I have to say that I am very glad that I had to wait so many years. My life has changed in the meantime. I live in New York, and I am living with a wonderful woman who has enabled me to experience this depth of emotion. I don't think I would have been able to write this work in such a way three years ago. *Morgen und Abend* is about my future and the future of every person who sees this opera. That forced me to dig deeply from an emotional perspective.

Dying and death are central themes in Morgen und Abend. However, unlike in the traditional opera repertoire, you do not implement these themes theatrically. Which death is experienced by Johannes, the main character in your opera?

Haas: It is true that Johannes does not die a theatrical death in the sense of a typical opera. He dies a real death. In traditional operas, we always see death from the perspective of the voyeur who is looking in from outside. However, in my operas I would like listeners to automatically see themselves as the central person, in this case Johannes. Nobody in the audience identifies with the dying Commendatore in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, for example – if they identify with anybody, it is Don Giovanni himself, but not the person who has died. It's like that whenever anybody dies in an opera. In *Morgen und Abend*, however, you suddenly notice that you are putting yourself in the role of the dead person. This creates a very deep and intense underlying emotional situation, which naturally presented me with a challenge from a compositional point of view as well.

Johannes dies a real death, but after that we no longer find ourselves in the real world, but rather in an in-between world.

Haas: Perhaps I should mention that I had a near-death experience at the age of 14, and so this in-between world is not entirely unknown to me. The important memory that has remained with me from this near-death experience is not the light that many others have seen in this situation, but rather an extremely loud, extremely high and extremely rapidly rotating sound. This sound is heard towards the end of the opera when Johannes and his friend Peter cross the threshold. Many people have reported seeing a person who has accompanied them during their lifetime and who comes and helps them – like Peter helps Johannes in this situation and accompanies him over the threshold. It shows something that we don't really know about, but we have a certain amount of experience of its beginning.

It has to be clear right from the start that we are dealing with something existential here.

Morgen und Abend begins with hard, martial beats in the percussion. What inspired you to write such an opening?

Haas: When I began to compose the opera, it seemed natural to think first about the overture. I initially asked myself, what is it all about? It is about birth, death, a mystical beginning. I wasn't happy with that idea, though. Then a sentence in the opera occurred to me, when the midwife says to Olai: "It isn't easy to be born." Then she adds: "And it isn't easy to give birth." At this point, I would add: "And it isn't easy to die." Then it became clear to me that everybody who goes to see the opera needs to realise right from the start that we are dealing with something existential here. The semantic significance of these beats becomes clear very soon because they form the acoustic backdrop to the woman's screams of pain and then ultimately the screams of the child when it has been born.

You probably read Fosse's novel Morgen und Abend first, and then the libretto at a later stage. Did you envisage Olai, Johannes' father, as a speaking role – and not a singing role – right from the beginning?

Haas: I originally wanted Olai to sing. Fosse gave me a gift in his libretto for that very reason – I had asked him to do that – these were vowels without any semantic significance, so that I could compose for these abstract cantilenas.

When I then saw and studied the libretto, I realised that the part can't be sung. It really has to be spoken, which creates a wonderful contrasting effect between the characters. There is Olai in the first part, who is alive and speaks. Then there are Johannes, his wife Erna and his friend Peter in the second part, who are dead and sing. I find this combination of spoken and sung texts very exciting. I am also playing with the expectations of the listeners. The opera begins with a male actor who is speaking. Then come large surges of sound that retreat again, and then Olai speaks once more. At this point in time, the audience is already waiting desperately for somebody to sing. The audience

may not be aware of the fact that they are waiting for the woman to sing just as the father is waiting for the news of his child's birth.

There is also a contrast between the male actor and the female voice in the role of the midwife and Johannes' daughter Signe, who must be sung by the same singer. Both the midwife and the daughter are positioned between the worlds – they could be called ambassadors. This contradiction was something that I could work with.

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This is a quote from an interview that you gave for the Royal Opera House in London: "Don't expect melodies, don't expect harmonies, just expect soundscapes." Could you explain that more precisely?

Haas: My music naturally has melodic elements, even very traditional ones. For example, when the midwife enters, we hear a very simple C minor. The listener should not expect certain harmonies, dissonances or aesthetic specifications from a contemporary opera. I would like people to simply go and see the opera and perceive it all like wandering through soundscapes. It is most important for me that the audience sits there with open ears, an open heart, and an open mind, and yields to the flow of sound, of what is being played and spoken.

Morgen und Abend is significantly different from your previous operas. In particular, Johannes' daughter Signe sings microtones, but the other singers don't. Why is that?

Haas: I cannot prevent people from repeatedly asking me questions about microtonality. I write music and I put what is necessary, what the singers can accomplish, into sound. In this opera more microtonality can be heard than is notated – this occurs automatically due to the complex nature of the voices. On the other hand, the D-A perfect fifths at the beginning of the opera, the

tonal minor and major chords, should sound without microtonal alteration (trivially formulated: simply correctly).

In general, I must say that I didn't intend everything that sounds microtonal in performances of my music to be microtonal, but for the people who listen to my music, it is irrelevant how I notate my music. I do not wish people to think: "Ah, now Sarah Wegener is singing sixth-tones in the role of Signe", but just: "Yes, the music that she is singing is beautiful..."

Interview: Sarah Laila Standke
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