

THE BLIND SINGER AND THE ABSENT COMPOSER

*On music and interdisciplinarianism in two works by Ana Torfs*

**0.**

In *Kritik des Musikanten*, an essay directed against the cult of spontaneous singing and music making in post-war music circles, Adorno recalls a painful anecdote from his youth. He tells of how his father, while out walking in the forest with his mother and sister, asked the two women to sing the song *O Täler weit, o Höhen* (Oh valleys wide, oh mountains high). The women were overcome with embarrassment, not because someone had expressly asked them to sing – as professional singers they were well used to that –, but because father Wiesengrund asked them to sing *spontaneously*, to pretend that the surroundings had prompted them to sing as if it was the most natural thing in the world. How wonderful the world is, *sing a song!* Being asked to sing ‘spontaneously’, as if the notes ‘tickle’ within and then bubble up and burst forth, that request paralyzes us and embarrasses us. No one sings spontaneously out of joy or sadness. In Western culture, music has lost its established place in social rituals and spontaneous singing has long been part of an ideology of spontaneous expression. We do still sing in everyday life, but we don’t do it at the top of our voices, nor when suddenly asked to do so. More often than not, singing as an ordinary, everyday occurrence just comes over us; we start humming unwittingly when we are alone, or if we have forgotten that there are in fact people around. If we sing in public, then it is often with a tinge of irony, so that others can always laugh at it.

The invitation to sing spontaneously, ‘just like that, for no reason’, is embarrassing because in so doing one fails to appreciate the dividing line between the natural person (and his way of behaving and speaking) and singing as an aesthetic practice. Every singer feels that he or she must cross a threshold to be able to sing. Nobody sings when cajoled into doing so. We should not be misled by the blessed smile or heartrending facial expression of some professional singers: although popular belief would have it that they are putting something ‘of themselves’ into their singing, they themselves know only too well that they must succumb to the work as to an alien law. Singing is losing oneself in the work of art. It is an exercise in self-alienation.

**1.**

It is to such an exercise in self-alienation that Ana Torfs subjects the singers who appear on the screens in her ‘video triptych’ *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* (1993). Torfs used dramatic music for this video installation, namely a ‘scenic madrigal’ by Claudio Monteverdi. *Il Combattimento* is a scenic piece full of dramatic action; it is moreover a piece from the time when music had only just discovered its dramatic powers. With the dramatic monody, a type of music developed at the beginning of the seventeenth century which did not serve a divine subject or anything at all, but relied entirely on its autonomous expressiveness. At the same time it became *expressive*. When music speaks for itself, when it asserts itself, it becomes the voice of humanity. From then on, the

theory of the affects and their rhetorical use rather than the ordered cosmos would form the theoretical basis of musical practice. The art consists in affecting the listener by the effective deployment of the right rhetorical means.

However, in *Il Combattimento* Torfs carefully excluded that affective overtone. The faces of the three singers – the narrator frontally in the middle section, the crusader Tancredi and the heathen maiden Clorinda in profile on the left and right sections – are stolid. When these ‘faces’ sing, only their mouths move. The rest does not flinch. When they are silent, they do look like filmed portraits. The rigid, ‘instrumental’ treatment of the faces does not correspond in any way to the human emotiveness and dramatic action in Monteverdi’s scenic madrigal. Torfs has separated the drama from the musical performance. She situates all the expression in the work of art, in the aesthetic construction, and treats the singers as passionless interpreters of their songs. Their mask-like faces form a screen which problematizes all empathic fusion with the sung drama. The singer who sings ‘convincingly’, seems to be absent when singing; the entrance to the drama is sealed. In this way Torfs overturns not only the illusion that the singer as a natural person is at one with what he is conveying (with his expressive singing), she refutes the idea of direct expression altogether. It is the music of Monteverdi, who introduced expressive gesture into music, which she chooses to subject to the sort of treatment that suspends all belief in the immediacy of expression. Thus she obliges us to approach Monteverdi’s *Il Combattimento* indirectly, not as pure emotion which takes hold of us and carries us with it, but as a succession of expressive figures and rhetorical conventions, as an aesthetic construction in which expression and emotionalism are always mediated.

Music is never the immediate expression of feelings. With the expressive monody of Caccini’s *Le Nuove Musiche* and, even more forcefully, with Monteverdi’s dramatized style of singing, music had made room for a human tone, for the expression of feelings, but that human tone was also captured in rhetoric. The emotional power of that music was based on a transparent *encoding* of ‘human feelings’. The distance between language and emotionalism is in any case also reflected in the role of the ‘testo’, the narrator who conveys the drama and acts as a rhetorical mediator. So Torfs’ ‘interpretation’ of Monteverdi is historically correct: the idea that the emotions had to be expressed in a natural way, detached from all convention, was after all alien to this music. The notion of a natural emotionalism would only emerge in the eighteenth century with, for instance, the *Empfindsamer Stil* (Sentimental style) concept. But also aside from that, the history of Western music is characterized by the experience that the human voice – or the voice of humanity – is only heard when the conventions are overturned and (thus) confirmed. *Erwartung*, Schönberg’s dream protocol and the pinnacle of free expression in music, is not only a musical eruption, a second’s vision of an unheard intensity spun out to half an hour; it is also a solitary moment in the development of music and of Schönberg’s whole body of work. Where the music becomes ‘expressionistic’ in the true sense, and breaks away from convention altogether, it is stemmed by intimate aporia: the impossibility of a pure expressive gesture. The ‘expressive’ is only meaningful when juxtaposed with something conventional. In Ana Torfs’ *Il Combattimento*, a piece of music from the period when musical expression originated is projected

against the background of that 'border awareness'. In so doing, however, not only the idea of unmanipulated expression is refuted, the total negation of expressiveness in the faces does not seem to be possible either. There is inevitably an element of pathos in the 'expressionlessness' of the faces in *Il Combattimento*: in its turn it becomes an 'expressive figure'.

## 2.

*Beethoven*. Is there an artist's name that sounds more romantic, more nondescript, more abstract than the name Beethoven? During the course of the nineteenth century Beethoven became the synecdoche of music. His bust on the upright piano assumed the deadly universality of the lyre and the laurel wreath above the concert stage. Beethoven stands for music as such: he is 'the' composer. He first held that symbolic office for the other composers, then for the nineteenth-century concert culture, which began to shape its classical 'canon', and finally for 'everyone', up to and including the lower middle classes who believe they have a bit of culture, and those who see culture as a thing worth having.

No artist was ever so heroized and identified with everything that was exemplary in his art form. No artist, therefore, has become so abstract in his public life, and it seems that Ana Torfs wanted to take that abstraction into account in her film *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* (Cycle of Trifles). How should Beethoven be treated? How should one set about making a film about the 'figure of Beethoven' which does not simply feed and reinforce that myth? Torfs drew on material that is a literal embodiment of Beethoven's daily existence during the last ten years of his life. Her script is based entirely on the *Konversationshefte* (conversation notebooks) people used to put across their messages to the now deaf composer. As Beethoven was deaf but not dumb, he himself hardly speaks in the books, and that is why Torfs decided to banish him from the film altogether. Though Beethoven is the key figure in the film, the one around whom everything revolves, he does not appear. He is a magnetic blind spot. Everything that is said, is directed at that blind spot; people prevail upon 'him' for one reason or another, try to persuade 'him' to do something, to advise 'him'. Beethoven is the abstraction to which pieces of language rivet, but without forming a continuous whole. The snippets of conversation are not coherent; what they have in common is the silence – the speechless body – which they call upon and in which they come to a standstill. They share not a story, but the lack of one.

By choosing to construct her film around the absent Beethoven, Torfs mimes the magnetism and the attractive power of the myth. There is something mythical even about his absence. His absence alone might remind us of the sublime reservedness of the unworldly, deaf composer. But at the same time Torfs turns the myth inside out by placing the absent Beethoven in a context in which even the greatest celebrity relinquishes a part of his status and to a certain extent becomes interchangeable – that of his everyday, domestic life. What makes Beethoven a 'figure' or a paragon, dissolves into a repetitive chain of day-to-day worries and physical complaints. Daily life at Beethoven's home is the life of everyone and anyone. In-between the conversation scenes, we are given short summaries of the most important facts in Beethoven's life, but no attempt is made to link those wider overviews with the anecdotal conversation scenes.

Unmanipulated, triviality and biography, the spoken snippet of conversation and the historical story are juxtaposed.

Beethoven disappears into the ordinary, the commonplace, but not to re-emerge as the glorious fetish of music history: the ordinary is too material and too abstract for that. When the guests say things that refer to their time – the 1820s – then it comes as an almost unexpected knowing wink in their trivial and timeless chatter. For the rest, in *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* the impression prevails that history has gone, and that these life-like excerpts – just about the most real and unadulterated to come down to us from Beethoven’s life – could be expressed by anyone at any time. It is in these excerpts of text, which are ‘historical’ in the most literal sense, that history huddles, and seems to dissolve in the murmur of timeless ordinariness. At the same time, the historical human being is also dispersed, the human being who sees himself as ‘the human being’ and therefore takes up his position in a historical project. What is human, in the eminent sense, cannot be so without history. And it is the greatest humanist among the composers that Torfs reduces to the deaf proximity of a speechless body.

### 3.

Ana Torfs interpreted her source material, the conversation notebooks, radically as a script. The notebooks are not just useable material, they are conceived as a protocol of terms and requirements which determine what is said and what is not said, who is seen and who is not seen. Even the way the images are arranged, as well as the way the characters are positioned in the image and in relation to the spectator, could be conceived as an accurate translation of what the notebooks ‘prescribe’.

The gaps and inconsistencies in the documents are not compensated for. Not only does the film remain loyal to Beethoven’s absence in the notebooks, Torfs also ‘translates’ the fact that the guests did not speak their text but wrote it down. By disconnecting image and text, and having the text recorded off screen in (Viennese) German, she reproduces the strangeness the text acquires for the speakers. Moreover, the subtitles appear not in the image, but in a separate black band underneath the screen.

Yet to a certain extent the filmed characters behave like speakers: they turn towards each other, their bodies seem to be assimilated into the flux of an ordinary discussion, and though their mouths are closed, you sometimes have the impression they might say something at any moment. Furthermore, the setting of the discussion also presupposes a certain proximity between the people involved in the conversation. That ‘speaking distance’ also requires interpretation – but how is this possible when one of the ‘speakers’ is missing? In that case this intimate distance can only be estimated from the spectator, and his proximity to the image. This is why Beethoven’s guests sit round the edge of the screen, often at a table which blends seamlessly with the black band bearing the subtitles. As a result, Beethoven almost always moves towards us, he sits on our side of the screen, which makes him strangely tangible. This is certainly the case in the scenes where the doctor leans over Beethoven, who must be lying somewhere just below the screen and who, we imagine, is looking up at the

doctor. He looks up just as the person watching the film looks up at the screen: we submit to the film as Beethoven submits to the trained medical eye.

Beethoven is outside the picture, but he is palpably close. This serves to heighten the attractive power of that 'blind spot' in the film. We would almost like to step into that imagined body, fill it with our own body, but the film does not allow that. This void is after all not just vacant; it has a name: Beethoven. The figure of Beethoven may be outside the framework and on our side, but his body is stamped with a name and so cannot possibly be a figment of the imagination. The blind spot that is called 'Beethoven' is tangible but unincorporate. When he seems closest, we have the feeling we see our own immobilized body lying in his as it stretches out in unfeeling proximity before us.

#### 4.

The script of the conversation notebooks also dictates the form the film takes and exerts pressure on that form. As the characters are in conversation, they don't move much. They sit, stand or lie at the forefront of the screen, and the fact that they are not really talking, makes their presence in the image even more static. Perhaps they are mostly listening, or have their ears pricked to hear what Beethoven – who at that moment is reading what they have written – is about to say. That would then mean that they are locked in the time of listening, or in the time between question and answer, word and reply. That tension in the dialogue, which manifests itself in the pauses and intervals, then 'immobilizes' them. At any rate their motionlessness and their vicinity ensure that they often position themselves in the viewfinder like the subject of a portrait – between the guests and the focal plane there is hardly room for another body. Apart from that, characters occasionally appear in the background, rather like figures from a genre painting. They are involved in ordinary, repetitive activities such as eating, cooking and cleaning, and at no time disturb the static character of the image.

The fact that these characters 'speak without opening their mouths', brings them to a standstill and turns every scene into a 'scene image'. So with its division into static tableaux the film is also very picturesque. But Torfs does not choose the aesthetic of the 'picturesque tableau' without a reason: to some extent, the aesthetic of the film is exacted by the textual material.

Torfs was not looking to make an anti-film, nor did she set her sights on any sort of interdisciplinary hybrid form. In the first instance she draws on 'spoken' text, on snippets of dialogue which could just as well have cropped up in an ordinary film. Her radicality consists in the way she immediately interprets this material as script. She radically subordinates 'film' as genre to the material translation process of filming; and it is this materialistically 'faithful' approach to filming which puts the film medium under pressure. Not just any interdisciplinary programme, but the foolhardy loyalty to the protocol of the sources, the rigorousness of the translation process, brings the film closer to other art forms and makes *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* first and foremost a 'picturesque' film. Loyalty to the material leads to a separation between sound and image, whereby we both look at tableaux and listen to a radio play. The most material filming is that which scrutinizes the material and takes contradictions seriously. It is also the least cinematic.



Despite the immobilizing effect of the film, the characters nevertheless move and the images do not stand still. The film is not a painting, and at the point where the film and painting go their separate ways from this intersection of the 'cinematic tableau', something happens which paradoxically enough is most reminiscent of theatre. The orientation of the characters to their opposite number, their immobility in a stable cinematic space – every scene is filmed from a fixed standpoint – almost makes the imaginary space of the screen a theatre box. The constant vicinity of the characters also puts one in mind of the relationship between audience and actor. Only in the theatre can characters be so close and so tangible, a few metres from us, and yet maintain a stylized presence – a stylization which is revealed simply by the mere presence of 'a character on the stage'.

## 5.

The strict and static nature of the film almost allows us to forget that, taken as a whole, the 'rigidly directed' acting style is quite realistic. Even though the film consists of 'images', of composed tableaux, there is nothing artistic or highly stylized about the performance of the actors, who are in any case for the most part amateurs. Their performance tries to convey in a credible and natural way that they are involved in an ordinary, everyday discussion. They do no more than that. The actors make no attempt to compensate by means of gesture or mime, by a conspicuous stance or explicit acting style for the words of which they are deprived. Neither is their performance particularly economical or minimalistic; they do not strive to reduce their acting to the 'essential'. At times they seem to absent-mindedly babble on, at others they prick up their ears in expectation. This talking is so 'natural' that it doesn't need any sharp characterization and requires little 'acting'. Only nephew Karl seems to act rather more, but then there is also more emotional tension in his snatches of conversation, which are permeated by his guilt-ridden relationship with his guardian Ludwig Van Beethoven.

So there is nothing unusual about what these characters do. One often has the feeling that they are indeed just talking, and that they were filmed during momentary silences, or just as they were about to say something – as if Torfs filmed talking characters and simply cut out the talking in-between. And yet this 'usual' emerges as something 'unusual'. Though we don't catch the characters posing or indulging in theatrical tricks, and though their behaviour is the normal behaviour of people talking, our attention is in fact constantly drawn to that normality. The small gestures and mime movements which are usually overlooked when someone is speaking, come to the fore. The natural behaviour which is 'self-evident' because it is immediately swallowed up in the talking, becomes a pose which is struck, a conscious act. Suddenly we have the impression that these actors are in fact constantly engaged in acting, that they are constantly in search of that one look, pose or facial expression that is appropriate for their script. They do not pretend to be normal and ordinary, but are constantly in search of the normal and ordinary. What they cannot master is what is most ordinary and unconscious in human conduct – what everyone does without thinking. *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* puts the ordinary between inverted commas, and explores it as something theatrical. The film does allow itself to be

read as a fascinated study of the micro theatricality of the ordinary. It is not an ordinary film which tries to make the acting seem as ordinary as possible; rather, the film derives its most ordinary, unconscious acting from its theatricality.

Céline Linssen and Dirk Lauwaert observe that it feels as if the characters in *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* are listening to their script.[1] And indeed one does have the impression that the actors are paralyzed by their text, and at times one might almost think that the exaggerated lack of motion on the screen arises from the medusal effect of their off-screen spoken text, that they are held captive by the feedback effects of their own words. The characters seem immobilized by their text, but not so much by the text itself, and not even just by the effect of that text on the other party. They are immobilized by the *working* of their text, by their talking as if it is something that is active outside them and produces effects. They are neither the subject nor the object of that activity, neither the author nor the recipient, but always both together. They talk and listen, and the film image is like a membrane stretched between that talking and listening. The film is a contact membrane which vibrates in the loop of projections and expectations, of question and answer, of speaker and listener. These images register not the speech and the actions, but their tension, the vibration that emanates from them. They show not how someone speaks, but how that speaking captivates him or is reproduced on his face. The conversation scenes show literally what is happening 'between' people: they reveal the humane in the 'pockets of silence' of which it is part.

Because every image is poised between word and retort, or action and reaction, not a single gesture is resolved. The 'interaction' between the characters consists only in minor displacements: they are there not on their own behalf, but on behalf of 'Schindler', 'Von Breuning' and 'Karl'. Because these people never develop into mature 'roles', however, it is as if the actors never really become their character, and we still see them there 'being' their character, poised between their ordinary and their other self. We are in fact never admitted into another world. It is as if the acting still has to begin – and it is at that moment that it is revealed in its nakedness and unobviousness. The acting folds back on itself on the threshold between the actor and his performance. If there is such a thing as reflexive or conceptual acting, then perhaps this is it.

## 6.

Torfs' *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* consists not only of conversation scenes. For example, she has used excerpts from Beethoven's diaries and letters which, as well as showing images from nature and close-ups of female hands preparing food, also serve as punctuation and a rhythmical element between the discussion scenes. Initially Torfs intended to insert shots of the actors singing Beethoven canons, though in the end these shots were not used. Because the canons have an interesting affinity with the 'ordinary' material discussed above and with Torfs' film in general, I would nevertheless like to look at them.

On the one hand, the canons are bound up by their polyphonic style with Beethoven's late style, but at the same time they are 'scherzi' which often contain bittersweet or ironically amicable allusions to friends and acquaintances of the composer. Together they constitute a real *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten*, even if in reality they are snippets which were never intended as a cycle, and which spread

over the years like the snatches of conversation in the film. Another pithy detail is that many of these musical doodles found their way into Beethoven's letters as adieus or musical salutes, so that they are in fact part of the everyday traffic, and not so far removed from the conversation notebooks. There is often a verbal link between the one-liners from the canons and the brusque diary or letter excerpts which Torfs inserted in-between the conversation pieces. The '*Österreicher, Eselreicher*' (Austrian, Donkey Man) taunt, which Beethoven recorded in a letter or in his diary, could be heard, for instance, in the text of Beethoven's last canon, the three-word *Esel aller Esel* (Donkey of Donkeys) dating from 1826 (Hess 277). The canon *Doktor sperrt das Tor dem Tod/Note hilft auch aus der Not*, consisting of eleven words (Doctor shuts the door on death/Notes help in times of need), is a condensed version of a note Torfs also used for her film – Beethoven wrote: '*Mein Arzt half mir, denn ich konnte keine Noten mehr schreiben. Nun aber schreibe ich Noten, welche mir aus der Not helfen.*' (My doctor helped me when I couldn't write any more notes. But now I can write notes, which help me in my need.) We find Beethoven's gruff sansculotte humour in the diary entries and letter excerpts as well as in the canon texts. Each additional word is a word too many, each frill that exceeds the level of undignified doggerel too 'conciliatory'. The form of the canons is not exactly soothing either. For an emancipated ear like Beethoven's, the canon form must have sounded rudimentary and puerile, like a sort of children's polyphony. One can make a canon of 'anything', and that indifferent relationship between form and substance is in fact un-Beethovenian. The mature Beethoven was after all the composer who consistently derived coherence in his works from the development of the motif material. He conceived the form as a dynamic totality, which emerged from its singular moments, and which thus formed the image of true humanity: a community conceived from subjective freedom.

But that humanity seems remote in the canons, and the 'ordinary' Beethoven, the Beethoven from the canon texts and the diary excerpts, does not really seem to be a paragon of warm humanity either. Not that he turns his back on the idea of a true humanity. Beethoven is not a cynic, he is an idealist, but an idealist to the bitter end, someone who wants to keep his ideal pure in the extreme, *till there is almost nothing left of it*. His mature work may convey the utopia of a true humanity, but human relationships in the existing world are always already tainted, they are always a compromise that brings shame on the ideal of a true and worthy world. The brusque Beethoven of these fragments and of the canons recognizes '*wie schroff einer sein muss um "Dir werde Lohn" zu schreiben*' (how harsh must you be to write 'You will be rewarded') – as Adorno observes in a separate note, referring to the passage in Beethoven's *Fidelio* which proclaims that true humanity will be rewarded in the end.[2] How obtuse does one have to be to think that one can speak *in the name of* that true humanity, as if one was its very heart and soul. In this respect it is telling that the 'derisive' canons often play with the foolish literalness of the names that appear in them: the text of a canon directed at the composer Friedrich Kuhlau goes like this *Kühl, nicht lau* (Cool, not lukewarm) and another canon plays with the name of E.T.A. Hoffmann (*Hoffmann, sei doch kein Hofmann/Nein, ich heiße Hoffmann/Und ich bin kein Hofmann* [Man of the court, don't be a man of the court/No, I am called Man of the Court/And I am not a man of the court]). In the heart of humanity



ideals disintegrate and what is left is 'people', who when addressed disintegrate into the materiality of their name.

Perhaps these canons are the most ordinary and 'banal' that Beethoven produced. In that sense there is almost nothing in his oeuvre that is so close to the Beethoven of Ana Torfs (even if in the film she only used excerpts from Beethoven's late string quartets, which ring out in the nature images). The canons are sparks which fly from the oeuvre to the ordinary, and what links them above all to the film is that, like Torfs' film, in the ordinary they encounter a sort of ultimate, material resistance. In the canons the ordinary manifests itself as what cannot be integrated into the idea of a worthy world. The ordinary is degrading and in that sense intolerable for the true man that Beethoven wants to be. Beethoven had to become deaf, Adorno observes in a noteworthy passage from his unfinished book about Beethoven, because he could not help recognizing what was unworthy in all human relationships. In Torfs' film the ordinary Beethoven represents what does not want to become part of our image of the composer, and to that end Beethoven 'had to' disappear from the film. If we disregard the myth, the ordinary Beethoven in *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* is what remains of Beethoven. It is almost nothing – the abstract proximity of a speechless body which cannot even be shown, but in which all the messages and gestures nevertheless come to a standstill. Imagine the timeless bust of Beethoven on the piano, and imagine that this bust acquires body and limbs, to end up with his fossilized surliness in the chair next to the spectator, face to face with the character on the screen. This Beethoven is an unimaginable *alien*. The division between the 'image' of Beethoven and the 'body' of Beethoven is well-nigh intolerable. Perhaps it is not insignificant that Beethoven died shortly before the discovery of photography or before the medium – which makes that tension all the more perceptible – came into general use. It is almost impossible and absurd to imagine Beethoven in a photograph, and at the same time the absent Beethoven in the film is like a fairy-tale negative of an unutterably ordinary, passive Beethoven, a negative that we can best imagine as a languid and speechless photographic print.

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(Translated from the Dutch by Alison Mouthaan-Gwillim)

[1] Céline Linssen, in *Skrien* 234, p 19; Dirk Lauwaert puts this and other interpretations forward, in: *Muziek & Woord*, May 1998, pp. 13-14.

[2] Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven. Philosophie der Musik, Fragmente und Texte (Nachgelassene Schriften, Abteilung I: Fragment gebliebene Schriften, Band 1)*, published by Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1993, in particular excerpt 72, pp. 56-57.