

Music for a broken world - A conversation with Alain Platel and Steven Prengels on Mahler, Pygmy music and Bach

Since the production of *Gardenia*, Alain Platel has been collaborating on a regular basis with Belgian composer Steven Prengels, who is both the creative mind behind the soundscapes for the dance performances by the Ghent choreographer and director, as well as their musical director. For *nicht schlafen* they drew inspiration from the symphonies and songs of Gustav Mahler. The Viennese composer wrote his music in the late 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century. It was a time of great uncertainty. New technologies, globalization, terrorism, social tensions and new forms of communication were the talk of the day, both in private conversation and in the media. The world was accelerating and nobody knew what all of this would lead to. Mahler was the son of Jewish parents, born in a Guesthouse and growing up near an army barracks. Child death claimed six of his siblings at a very young age. Folk and dance music, military marches, funeral marches and Jewish music blended together in his musical imagination early on and would remain essential elements of his musical language until his final works. His music is a nervous journey through the colliding soundscapes of his childhood in which celebrations, mourning and drumrolls were all vying for attention at the same time. Gustav Mahler composed fragmented music for a broken world that was on the verge of disappearing.

Steven Prengels: Like a seismograph, Mahler's music recorded the underground tensions of the years before the First World War. Plenty of parallels can be drawn between our time and Mahler's, which seemingly makes his music resonate with a contemporary sense of life. The book *Der taumelnde Kontinent. Europa 1900-1914*, in which historian Philipp Blom describes the years before the First World War, was one of the sources of inspiration during the creation of *nicht schlafen*.

Alain Platel: Initially, I resisted the notion of creating a performance around Mahler. Late romantic symphonic music did nothing for me. But when I read Blom's book, I suddenly realized working with Mahler would pose an interesting challenge. These past few days I have been reading things about Donald Trump or Erdogan, the terror of IS, the Brexit and nationalism rearing its head across Europe, which show a frightening number of parallels with the times in which Mahler lived. Many friends and colleagues who attended the rehearsals in our Ghent studio in recent weeks, said the performance reflected a very contemporary sense of confusion, fear, uncertainty and explosive violence, even though, at first sight, they were under the impression of seeing an archaic, primitive tribe on stage.

Did Mahler's music influence the choreographical and musical form of *nicht schlafen*?

Platel: *nicht schlafen* exhibits the same kind of fractures and contrasts as Mahler's own music; the performance is composed of very diverse ingredients, highly contrasting atmospheres. Mahler was one of the very first composers to 'sample' music. In that sense I can see similarities with my own work. In his symphonies and songs, Mahler tied 'high' and 'low' art together. Different styles and moods collide. Steven and myself view his music as an invitation to keep

sampling. For example, I immediately wanted to connect his music to African polyphonic traditions, brought in by the Congolese singers Boule Mpanya and Russell Tshiebua.

Prengels: Like Mahler's symphonies, *nicht schlafen* is a very narrative piece, albeit without a clear narrative. You have no clue as to its exact nature, but you do start feeling you achieve an understanding of sorts. During rehearsals, I got the feeling that the performance would function as one big Mahler adagio. My soundscapes do not emerge from a preconceived plan to take Mahler's collage techniques to the limit, but from the creative interaction with Alain and the dancers during rehearsals. I try to organically respond to what everyone comes up with during the improvisations.

In his early works, Alain often used baroque music: Bach in *Iets op Bach, pitié!* or *tauberbach* or Monteverdi in *vsprs*. Mozart, in *Wolf*, seemed the exception to that rule. Mahler's music wasn't exactly in line with expectations. Or was it?

Platel: In the past, I always used to argue that the gap between baroque music and my dance language was so wide and the contrast between them so strong, that they actually reinforced each other. The ugliness of this world achieved some sort of beauty through the music. Conversely, Bach or Monteverdi seemed to become even more emotional through their combination with the tormented, abrasive, raw movement language of the dancers. In the *C(H)OEURS* project, which focused on the choral music of Verdi and Wagner, however, I noticed to my great surprise that, with the music of Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*, my dance seemed to be coming home. It was as if music and dance were running parallel and supporting each other. With Mahler, something similar happens. The nervousness and aggressiveness, passion and yearning for a lost harmony that is expressed by Mahler's music, is a match for the images I'm looking for in my work. Sometimes, of course, I keep working with contrasts in *nicht schlafen*, like in the famous Adagietto from the *Fifth Symphony*, which I combine with short nervous dance phrases. During the long first movement of the *Second Symphony*, however, I ask the dancers to stick to the music as closely as possible with their movements and to seek some sort of fusion between Mahler and their dancing. For me, Mahler's music has to do with total surrender. The dancers need to go all out, follow the music. It is fascinating to see how dancers who stick closely to Mahler's music, especially, seem to be able to better convey a sense of detachment and liberation. The dancers who resist Mahler, appear less free. That is a very paradoxical experience, which seems to have a lot to do with Mahler himself. He was a control freak who filled his scores with over-detailed dynamic and expressive directions for the musicians: "etwas zurückhaltend", "etwas täppisch und sehr derb" or "nicht schleppen"... At the same time, his music is extremely compelling. I recognize something of myself in it. Often, my performances are a form of organized chaos, but in everyday life I really like punctuality and order...

Prengels: The more I read about Mahler's life, the more parallels I discover with Alain. (Laughs.) They both seem to deliberately seek out suffering in their work, even though they are aware that they will be suffering themselves during the creative process.

Platel: I do tend to go very deep during rehearsals. But I assure you that I'm far from unhappy.

At a certain point in *nicht schlafen* you link Mahler to African music. Why this combination?

Platel: Encountering Boule and Russell in the context of the *Coup Fatal* production, enriched my personal life immensely. They bring to the table a unique way of being and they sing Pygmy music with their very own polyphonic and rhythmic complexity. Even from the outset of the preparations for *nicht schlafen* I could imagine some sort of counterpoint between this African music and the adagios of Mahler. With this fusion, I intended absolutely no grand political statement on, for instance, post-imperialism or post-colonialism. "Just act normal", I often say to myself and the dancers. Is the fact that we have two black dancers a statement? That we have both a Muslim and an Israeli dancer? That one woman dances among all these men? No, absolutely not. Everybody on stage should just be themselves.

Pregels: Less is more. Which is what often occurs to me while creating the soundscapes. Boule and Russell improvise from Mahler's material and end up with their own African musical language in an organic way. The influence goes both ways: we confront our Western classical music with African culture. At the same time Russell and Boule Mahler learned to sing in German. Initially, they hated Mahler and asked us how we could listen to such sad music for our leisure. Today, they have come to love Mahler.

Why, in addition to the African music, does this Mahler project yet again incorporate an excerpt from Bach?

Platel: Like Hitchcock in his movies, Bach keeps popping up in my productions. It seems like a fetish. Bach reassures me. Yet the presence of Bach in *nicht schlafen* also rings true from a content perspective. 'Den Tod niemand zwingen kunnt' from Bach's Kantate *Christ lag in Todesbanden* arrives at a turning point in the performance, the moment at which it is shown that death can be ritualized in a new way. For me, the ritualization of death is a main theme of *nicht schlafen*.

Interview by Jan Vandenhouwe