

WENN ALLES KLAPPT



Alles klappt, a new musical theatre piece by Ondřej Adámek and Katharina Schmitt, was premiered at the prestigious Munich Biennale this June. It is a confident and solid work by a generation of Czech and German artists well accustomed to working internationally in a variety of contexts, pointing to both the encouraging recent developments in new opera in the Czech Republic, and the huge differences in institutional grounding and production possibilities between the Czech lands and Western Europe.

Ondřej Adámek is currently among the most successful Czech composers, and it is telling that he has done most of his professional work abroad, particularly in Germany and France (where he also studied at the Conservatoire National Supérieur). The career trajectory of Katharina Schmitt, on the other hand, is quite unusual: born and raised in Bremen, she came to Prague in 2000 searching for a different context, inspired by an interest for the ongoing cultural and social change in Central and Eastern Europe. She has since become one of the leading directors with an experimental bent in the Czech Republic, tying her name to the innovative Studio Hrdinů theatre in Prague.

Schmitt has only recently recently branched out as an opera director: in 2016, she directed the opening performance at the New Opera Days Ostrava festival (NODO), a double bill of Ligeti's *Aventures* and *Nouvelles Aventures*. In 2017, she wrote the libretto - with Lukáš Jiříčka - to Jiří Kadeřábek's opera *No Man*, which she also directed in its premiere at the National Theatre in Prague. This is the first collaboration between Schmitt and Adámek, who both live currently live in Berlin.

The Not-so-Silent Archive

Alles klappt plays out as a mapping of making audible and visible the invisible dynamics of an archive. What is written is not necessarily what is said, and not in the least what is meant by the carefully selected, dissected, and reassembled phrases which once attempted to describe something as indescribable: as people having their lives broken apart, bodies and objects separated, catalogued and shipped off to different fates - some to be preserved and others destroyed.

The piece was developed based on archive material directly connected to composer Ondřej Adámek's own family history. The libretto - written by director Katharina Schmitt - is built on bureaucratic language, the enabler of a systematic and violent process, which is then posited alongside postcards full of well-wishing and assurances of health sent home to family in Prague from the camps at Birkenau and Terezín, as well as catalogue of apartments left behind by Jews who had "moved away", which Adámek's grandfather was forced to put together for the Nazis. As a compliment to the programme, we receive a facsimile of the original

postcards, themselves a complex map of signs, symbols and secretly coded messages which the artists have attempted to decode - or at least interpret - through this performance.

The performance begins with Adámek scanning the stage with a metal detector. He searches for something buried, hidden; listening for sounds that would indicate that something is in fact there, waiting for him. He retreats and other figures become audible. Breath - words not yet born - develop into syllables and eventually phrases begin to be passed around the stage by six singers. They manoeuvre crates into place; downstage, two percussionists wheel in their array of instruments one by one. Adámek himself conducts from a booth to the right of the stage connected by a video feed to





monitor screens to the left and behind the audience. This way, the performers can follow his guiding hands whichever direction they might be facing, in a kind of reverse panopticon.

In this makeshift office the workers begin to unwrap objects wrapped up in carpet fragments. Working as a team, they dust them off to the tune of syllables building up and transforming into slogans and phrases indicating how the objects should be considered and handled. The objects are re-catalogued, re-wrapped in the more contemporary material of plastic wrap. In a sense, the discovery and repacking of the objects reflects the digging in the archive, re-working and re-interpreting the language for a contemporary format in the medium of music theatre.

Everything is Running Smoothly

These uses of language is the strength of the performance, as well as of the collaboration between Adámek and Schmitt. The English working title of the piece was “False Good News”, which is

a clearer suggestion that these words should not be taken at face value: one is required to read between the lines, and the circular affirmation that *Alles klappt* (everything is running smoothly) is simply not the truth.

This well oiled machine takes some time to assemble itself, not only in finding its language through the recitation of slogans, but by arriving at points of contact - sometimes through physical movement, varying distance between performers on the stage, or coming together vocally at certain moments - “April!” and “Mail!” are expressed in unison as if the progression of time was one of the few things experienced that can be expressed together, while other aspects of their archiving, counting and inventory work are individual tasks that are “consulted” with others through fragmented vocal exchanges and affirmations.

The personal stories taken from the postcards are eventually found in a similar crate, and likewise embodied in objects, but to a completely different effect. Since we have already been introduced to

the structured and systematic world of the philosophies of quantity and progress, the uncovering of feelings that have also been waiting to be revived comes as a sharp contrast to the cold bureaucratic approach of labelling and wrapping.

The singer who first touches this sensitive material is emotionally affected. To begin with, the others reject her, finding comfort in each other instead. However, one by one, they are also drawn to the sensitive material, and each character takes up an object and appears to channel the stories hidden in heirlooms and letters, trying to give form to the emotions behind the misleading shapes of the words themselves; trying to give the writer a voice again, if only for a few moments.

Once these objects have told their stories, they are not returned to their crates, but finally buried, or at least laid to rest until they are dug up again some day. At the end of the piece, these words and voices, which have temporarily borrowed the bodies

of the performers, intensify until the exhausted singers collapse and return to a wordless, voiced rhythm of breath.

Alongside and underneath this vocal mosaic, the tuned percussion build layers of rhythms and textures, building up terrain for the voices to work on without competing with them. The piece is almost entirely built from rhythms and beats of different kinds, waxing and waning in complexity.

There are very few melodies and the opera singers rarely sing fully, but as is explicitly outlined in the score, the performers are required to have trained operatic voices although they are seldom used as such. This made the casting process challenging, as it was not easy to find performers who could both perform Adámek's score and attain the scenic presence that Schmitt was looking for. Fortunately, the frame of the Münchener Biennale provided resources to find artists with the specific skills needed for these roles.



I spoke with Adámek and Schmitt about their process, and they described how a deep trust in their collaborating partner, extensive discussions, and listening all helped provide a solid basis for the working process. The result is an innovative new music theatre piece of a high standard, which is thought provoking in addition to having attained aesthetic and conceptual maturity.

In contrast to other pieces at the festival, *Alles klappt* is not particularly context- or site-specific to the festival and will tour after its run there. The Münchener Biennale is a festival specifically focused on producing premieres, an incubator for this genre which falls somewhere between devised theatre, opera, experimental music, and performance art, flanked by a curious and supportive community and atmosphere which allows artists to develop new methods, strategies, and solutions for staging musical compositions in the laboratory of the theatre space.

Apart from the nuts and bolts required for staging a show, it also offers theoretical frameworks, workshops, platforms, and discussions to challenge what new music theatre can be, encourage it to stay relevant to un-theatrical issues, and trust artists to experiment and provoke through the medium of new music theatre.

This year's festival theme, "Private Matter", was chosen out of curiosity for how the younger generation (the target age group for the invited artists is around 35) might address the personal, as these "digital natives" have grown up in a world where privacy has a different meaning and is often closely shaped and controlled by technological devices and systems which have also, in a sense, been "composed".

Of course, not every project needs to be deeply personal for an artist, and ultimately, such projects are few and far between. Sometimes it might take half a lifetime to find the right context and language to bring an idea or source material to light, and a lot of patience to wait for that moment. We can be thankful that Ondřej Adámek found his opportunity to open that archive box, and not only that, but also the right company to give it a voice again. Given the show's success at the Munich Biennale, we might even hope for a production in the Czech Republic.



PHOTO: ARMIN SMALOVIC 7x

Alles klappt

composer and conductor: Ondřej Adámek
libretto and director: Katharina Schmitt

Münchener Biennale Festival of New Music Theatre
Residenztheater/Marstall, München

premiered on the 6th of June 2018

Further performances:
starting 18th of October 2019 - Basel, Gare du Nord