

Rebecca Saunders

YES (2017)

Yes refers to Molly Bloom's monologue, the final chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. This monologue can be regarded as a kind of literary collage, a web woven from the innumerable paths traced by stories, thoughts, associations, and moments in a continuous, unrelenting high-energy stream: a snapshot, a state of being before and during the act of falling asleep, amid glimmerings of the subconscious.

Oscillating between moments of absence and presence, the text is not always audible, remaining often subcutaneous, yet still tangible and present. The monologue is often sung, but also recited by the soprano and the instrumental musicians, be it on an out- or in-breath, half-whispered, nearly silent, or suppressed beneath a hand. At times words or phrases rear up, becoming visible, audible and intelligible, before disappearing again, consumed within the flow of the music – just as moments of Bloom's biography, personality, and memories take on temporary form in her inner, stream-of-consciousness monologue, only to sink back into the river of time.

Working with the voice, its limits, and the need of breath can capture an innate human fallibility, a raw intimacy – and exploring a multitude of ways to work with the breath opened up a whole new world of sonic and emotional possibilities. The various forms of recitation of the text seeks partly to suppress and transform the monologue into a multitude of a sonic surfaces, which the music then implies, suggests, frames and re-contextualises. While *Yes* eschews any immediacy of meaning, its juxtaposition of words and music seeks to unleash meaningful, emotionally charged relationships from within the text.

The repeated 'yes' is ambiguous and complex. It casts shadows of and allusions to: the moment of half-conscious orgasm; a life-affirming 'yes'; the 'yes' that seals one's fate; and Bloom's recollections of myriad sexual encounters. These deeply erotic moments – in all their facets, from romantic to soberingly grotesque – appear in the music in a variety of shadings, which overlap and coalesce. *Yes* closely explores the monologue's most explicit passages – specifically intending to rebuke any coy, clichéd interpretation of Molly Bloom – plumbing the fathomless depths of Joyce's text, with its unleashing of a raw sexual energy that refuses narrow definitions of sex and gender.

A singer stands silently on the stage – a theatrical moment in itself. The human body – our anticipation of it, of every movement of the eyes, the corners of the mouth – therein lies infinite dramatic potential. In *Yes*, the soprano, the instrumentalists and the conductor are all viewed as protagonists in a quasi-abstract theater, co-existing in a shared sonic landscape. The 28 separately composed soli, chamber-music works, and ensemble pieces – the modules – are distributed throughout the space, and are collaged in a spatial and musical polyphony.

Almost every module represents, with exhaustive insistence, an immutable state, always in essence the same. Fragments, each time slightly varied, gradually create a single image or 'object': imprints reiterated and projected into time and space, like a giant mobile seen from many perspectives. The light, the focus, and the position from which it is perceived are altered, as is our nearness and distance to the object – a manifest complex protraction of the one single thing.

Yes explores a music which steps out of the flow of time, which is projected into space like a sound sculpture – and which, at the moment of listening, seeks an absolute focus on the physical presence of the sound.

©Saunders, interview with Barbara Barthelmes of the Berlin Festspiele in 2017

[Note: This version of the programme text is out of date. For an up-to-date version, please contact Rebecca Saunders' office, thank you.]