

EWA GUDERIAN-CZAPLIŃSKA

(hə'reɪ)

Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute

[ˈhu:r kobjə+]

concept, libretto, direction: Marta Górnicka

score: IEN

literary collaboration: Agata Adamiecka

project I: *This Is the Choir Speaking* (premiere: 13 June 2010)project II: *Magnificat* (premiere: 27 June 2011)

This women's choral project created by the Theater Institute (two consecutive editions: *This Is the Choir Speaking* and *Magnificat*) promised to be something remarkable even when the cast was still being filled out: there was an open call for all women who wanted to work together, regardless of age, profession, appearance, and vocal abilities. An interesting idea: applying for a choir without voice training, music reading abilities, and all the other prerequisites – and finding one's place within it. I suppose that the “other prerequisites,” meaning an elementary feel for rhythm, were desirable, but undoubtedly professional music education was somewhere at the bottom of the list for recruiting participants. And on the top of the list was, perhaps, the need to do something new, to act, though in a direction that was not strictly defined. In the end the choir was made up of women who were beautifully diverse and beautifully united. There were very young girls, middle-aged women, and somewhat older women, with voices clear as a bell, or – for variety – with gravelly textures, each one different, each with its own personality, which, in a peculiar way, less obscured the unity than brought it to the fore. The attire of the choir singers seemed like work outfits, ordinary and comfortable, but not identical: cotton shirts, leggings or pants, sometimes a shirt; here a “trashy” style, there a bit of class in a more decorative blouse. On the stage, an empty white landing gently sloped toward the audience. They grouped in various formations: they created a shared front or scattered into

smaller units, sometimes stepping up for a solo. The women stood, sat on the floor, knelt, lay down; face front, sideways, or backs turned. They controlled their facial expressions, but sometimes their faces twisted in anger or cracked into a smile. Of course, sometimes they also sang (in the traditional sense of the word), but seldom; they more often chanted, whispered, screamed, produced multi-voice combinations or tore out evenly in musical declamations through the alternating arrangement of high and low sounds. They did, then, sing unabated – if we call singing the simplest predetermined way of producing sounds, unlike ordinary speech. Particularly given that there was a precise score, minded by a conductor who remained in taut, intense contact with the whole group.

In the first edition the patchwork libretto included recipes (*Ćwierczakiewiczowa*¹), a summary of Moniuszko's *Halka*,² a parody of *Sleeping Beauty*, Lara Croft and her “phenomenally short shorts,” fragments of *Antigone* (the song on the power of love), and advertising slogans. In the second edition – now quite theme-oriented – the textual collage included quotations from the Bible (including the *Song of Songs*), fragments of prayers, statistical data on “non-religious, though practicing” Poles (“71 per cent choose church weddings, 74 per cent baptize their children”), excerpts from press articles and statements by priests, as well as “defenders of the cross”³ or praising the Colossus of Świebodzin,⁴ the description of the new dress and crown of the Black Madonna⁵ (decorations were added in September 2010 in the form of diamonds, gold, bits of meteorites and a fragment of metal from the presidential Tupolev); but there were also quotes from *Forefather's Eve*, Marilyn Monroe assured us that her heart “belongs to daddy”, Elfriede Jelinek cut through, and alongside her, a recipe for meat gelatin *chardonnay* was seductively proffered by Nigella Lawson; the Mother of God took the floor, also advertising herself (“I am the logo of the Polish Church, I am a brand name you can trust”). All these scraps of text – hissed, chanted, screamed, sung – are arranged in carefully constructed

counterpoint, so as to critically ascertain (in the first edition) what languages we still use to speak of women, and in the second edition, to “face off” with the “image of the Holy Virgin Mary. With its ideological and aesthetic authority. With the magnetic power of this holy icon of femininity,” as the director claims.

In this performance the most important, basic ingredient is the choral form. It is, however, surprising and reconstructed.

forward. But it never ceases to be a choir: the women are one body, their breaths ideally balanced, their movements precise, in all the texts the voices come together and hit the mark, the conductor marks and sets the tempo. At the same time, it is not a choir for an instant, because it does not create a unified “collective character” – on the contrary, it exhibits the individuality of the choir singers, giving the impression that each one is speaking in her own name, that this female collective is



A great deal of strength is generated through its reshaping, through the act of giving (restoring?) it a social function. Marta Górnicka calls this form “post-opera” and, as I see it, this is not only a question of changing the concept of musicality (sound quality), but above all, of constructing a play based purely on the work of the choir: there are no orchestra or soloists, the choir does everything by itself. This is a play of body and voice (an orchestra in itself: through sampling, murmuring, snorting); when necessary, a soloist or a small group steps

operating as an “I.” This also changes the meaning of the conductor’s participation, as this is not a relationship of dependency, but one of partnership; nor is the audience excluded, as the conductor stands between viewers in the first row, and thus is “among us,” sharing her energy with both sides, making the two groups (audience and choir) come closer together.

On the poster for the project the words “chorus of women” are written in a special kind of lettering, often used by the Theater Institute – using punctuation marks in place of some

letters, reversed symbols. But here the name is also placed in square brackets, emphasizing its phonetic transcription. This strategy – similar to the tactics of the Futurists, who launched an attack on conventional writing – also reminds us what the choir is speaking up about. For this is not entirely obvious – though at a first glance it seems the incarnation of discord and rebellion, a passionate protest against the objectification of women, against the constant demand of submission. But it is not as though we have already learned this lesson. The phonetic inscription is to show us how we really hear something; it tears us from the orthographic norm developed by the culture of writing. The same goes for the choir: introducing texts from glossy magazines or sermons into a context where they do not belong allows us to hear them “in square brackets,” it takes them from their natural environment and shows how they work. But ultimately it uses them to speak of the fact that there remains no female language; that there are persuasions and usurpations manipulating the image of women according to the needs of a male world.

To achieve the effect of “hearing the lack,” the choir needed to be specially constructed. In *The Taming of the Shrew*⁶ directed by Krzysztof Warlikowski, the last scene (Katherine’s confession) is so compelling because the whole play works toward it: we must know how a slave becomes a slave, how it was possible that she chooses to enter the cage, allowing herself to be shut away in it, and now, from behind the bars, she declares her happiness. In this scene everything formed a startling counterpoint: the text, which gave the lie to the voice and to the tears, the humiliated body in the wedding dress, the bride with no life. [*hu:r kobj+*] (“[kɔ:rəs əv wɪmən]”) is constructed like the final scene of *The Taming of the Shrew*, but without the action that comes before it – we go at once to the counterpoint and contradiction, but with different vectors: here women are fully aware of their own strength, but they have no language to support it. Surrounded by recipes and Church admonitions one can lose this strength and even forget it exists. The task of the choir is to restore power to women in the face of this lack and oppression. To restore the public right to use their voices and bodies.

The strongest argument here is the choir singers themselves. Because they have regained this power and can share it with us, they convince us that we can do it too. These are not professional actresses, with many performances behind them; they surely had to break through a great many prejudices and fears before they took the stage and released a scream. When we hear a choir conducted by Stulgrosz,⁷ for example, the delight in the beauty of the rendition blends with regret, derived from the certainty that we are excluded from something, that we ourselves will never sing in such a way. The distance between them and us cannot be crossed. When we listen to the Chorus of Women we feel that this revolt is also within the capabilities of our bodies. With Stulgrosz’s choir we enter a sphere that maintains the social oppression, reproducing cultural models. With the choir of women, on the other hand, we drop out of it, see ourselves in a new configuration.

Yet this choir is equally precise, practiced, focused, it counts down to the second. The difference is that it has put forward its own model, its own vision of culture.

All this is well and good, you say, except that we buy tickets, we sit in our seats, the division between actresses and audience holds firm – so what is this new model if so much of the cultural framework has remained intact? This “normal” sort of participation in a play is another part of the game – the sad message implied by the performance is that there is no way beyond the limits of culture. The choir singers again (as in inside the play) operate in the field of the “hot” and “cold” revolution: the former wins us back our body, we know that we can scream, whisper, sing; the latter helps us to perceive and to understand the oppressive side of culture. The “ordinary” aspect of participating in a play says so much that there is no new world invented here, but rather it tries to get involved in its framework. The choir infringes upon no social norms, it does not transgress or provoke – but it does show how we can tinker with the social division of voices without stepping outside the limits of the theater. ■

¹ Lucyna Cwierzakiewiczowa – a remarkably popular author of nineteenth-century cookbooks and books for housewives (her best-known work, from 1858, *365 Dinners for Five Zloty*, was reprinted over twenty times).

² A Polish opera with music by Stanisław Moniuszko and a libretto by Włodzimierz Wolski, first staged in 1848 in Vilnius (as a two-act opera), and in 1858 in Warsaw (after being reworked into a four-act version, which is preferred for staging in our day). It tells of the love a highlander village girl, Halka, for the nobleman Janusz, who, despite his promises, abandons Halka (with their child) and marries the rich noblewoman Zofia. On their wedding day, Halka is deranged with despair and wants to burn down the church, but ultimately (affected by the sublime song emanating from the church) forgets her revenge and commits suicide by throwing herself from a rock into a raging river. *Halka* was the first work by Moniuszko – today called “the father of Polish opera” – and its most popular fragments (such as the *mazur* from Act One, or Jontek’s aria *Szumią jodły na gór szczytce*) are not only known to opera-goers, but widely recognizable.

³ The defenders of the cross movement – a wooden cross was placed in front of the Presidential Palace in Warsaw five days after the crash of an airplane which, on 10 April 2010, held a delegation of state rulers flying to Russia for a ceremony marking the anniversary of the Katyn crimes; the plane crashed near Smolensk, none of the ninety-six people on board survived. Among the victims of the catastrophe was the reigning President of the country, Lech Kaczyński, and his wife, Maria. Flowers were laid and candles were lit in front of the palace on Krakowskie Przedmieście Street, while the cross, placed there by boy scouts, was to mark the spot where a monument for the victims was to be located after the mourning period had ended. Three months later, when newly-elected President Bronisław Komorowski decided to remove the cross from the street “to a place more suitable for a religious symbol,” a “cross defense movement” was initiated: people protesting against the intent to remove it, holding constant vigil, demanding the swift erection of a monument – in the same

place – who refused to accept the verdict of the investigations into the catastrophe (that it was an accident) and who were unable to part with their own narrative (an attack on the airplane). A group of “defenders of the cross” repeatedly clashed with groups representing those in favor of moving the religious symbol to the church (to reclaim the secular space of the city) and with the forces of law and order right outside the Presidential Palace. On these dramatic events see, among others, Dariusz Kosiński’s book from a performance and theater perspective, *Teatra polskie. Rok katastrofy*, Krakow-Warsaw 2013.

⁴ The world’s tallest figure, the gigantic Jesus Christ the King of the Universe statue erected on the outskirts of the town of Świebodzin (around eighty kilometers from the Polish-German border) in 2010. Situated on a sixteen-meter-high mound, the figure itself is thirty-six meters high (three meters taller than the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro). The initiator of the project was the local prelate priest, Sylwester Zawadzki, who made the construction from parishioners’ contributions as a “sign of gratitude for the jubilee year of 2000 and the enthroning of Christ the King in Świebodzin lands.” The monument is presently becoming a pilgrimage site.

⁵ This picture (icon) depicting the Mother of God with child is known as the Image of the Częstochowa Mother of God or the Black Madonna. Legend attributes the work to Saint Luke the Evangelist; the picture probably appeared in Poland in the fourteenth century and was held in the Paulinist monastery on Jasna Góra in Częstochowa. It is the best known Christian symbol in Poland, famed for many miracles and cures (as shown by the signs of gratitude that have hung for centuries in the Jasna Góra chapel). The cult of the picture involves clothing it in expensive “dresses” (there are nine, including ruby, diamond, gold, and amber), as well as crowns. The most recent dress and crown were placed on the picture as an Offering from the Nation during the great ceremony on 4 September 2010, on the centenary of the crown given to Mary of Jasna Góra by Pope Pius X; the

decorations were made by an artisan goldsmith and amber craftsman from Gdańsk, Mariusz Drapikowski; alongside gold, silver, amber and precious stones he used shards of meteorites to create Mary’s robes and crown, and at the bottom of Jesus’s robes he placed a “ring thrown from a cattle car by a prisoner being transported to Auschwitz to be killed, and a fragment of the airplane from the Smoleńsk catastrophe, with a checkerboard-pattern of the fragments arranged in the national colors of the Polish air force. These two offerings, hidden in the folds of the Child’s robes, speak of joining in His mercy and praise” (quoted from: Z. Rozanow, “Nowy strój Częstochowskiej Pani,” *Tygodnik Niedziela*, No. 36, 05.09.2010).

⁶ A play directed by Krzysztof Warlikowski, produced at the Dramatyczny Theater in Warsaw in 1998, in which femininity was “taught” to Katherine by a trio of drag queens, and the basic issue concerned the mechanisms that constructed gender in culture; it was one of the first Polish plays, following the system change of 1989, to contain such harsh reflections on the repressive cultural norms and to question a faith in a defiant individual’s capacity for self-determination within its structures.

⁷ Stuligrosz’s choir, properly known as: The Boys’ and Mens’ Choir of the Poznań Philharmonic, also known as the “Poznań Nightingales” or the “Stuligrosz Choir.” They have existed continuously since 1949, when Professor Stefan Stuligrosz brought the choir (established during the war years) its first major performance at the Warsaw Philharmonic. The choir is renowned around the world, plays many concerts, has recorded dozens of records. It has a very broad repertoire: from Medieval and Renaissance vocal works and the masterpieces of Bach, Handel, Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven, to the Romantic compositions of Chopin and Schubert and contemporary works. Following the death of Stefan Stuligrosz, the legendary conductor and head of the ensemble, the choir is presently led by a student of the professor, Maciej Wieloch.