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## **The Choruses of Marta Górnicka (PL), illustrated by HYMN TO LOVE (2017)**

For a long time now the wallpaper on my laptop shows a snapshot of one of the most remarkable theatre plays I have ever seen, HYMN TO LOVE (2017) from Polish director, author, and singer Marta Górnicka (Image 1). This play really touched me when I saw it back in 2018 in La Rose des Vents, Lille (France) as part of NEXT Arts Festival.

Marta Górnicka is a graduate of the Faculty of Drama Directing at the Theatre Academy in Warsaw. She studied at the Frederic Chopin School of Music in Warsaw, at the Warsaw University and the State Drama School in Krakow.<sup>1</sup> She is globally renowned for her new contemporary concept of the ancient chorus. The term *chorus* could simply be defined as a group who performs texts vocally (mostly in *unison*) accompanied with choreographic moves - not to be confused with *choir*, which includes only singing (mostly *polyphonic*) certain songs in group. The power of (collective) language/voice/body is central to Górnicka's work. In 2009 she founded the modern tragic chorus CHÓR KOBIEŃ (THE CHORUS OF WOMEN) as a theatre project in collaboration with the Theatre Institute in Warsaw (Poland), which later led to THE CHORUS OF WOMAN FOUNDATION, established in 2015.<sup>2</sup> CHÓR KOBIEŃ aims to reclaim spaces for women and bring the chorus back to modern theatre. In 2019, Marta Górnicka won the "POLITYKA'S Passport" award for this new concept as a vehicle of artistic and social change.<sup>3</sup> Autumn that same year she established the POLITICAL VOICE INSTITUTE (PVI) at the Maxim Gorki Theatre (Germany), which researches and develops practices in the domain of the political

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<sup>1</sup> "Marta Górnicka – Bio," last accessed on 11 November 2021, <https://gornicka.com/bio/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Marta Górnicka – Bio"; "Marta Górnicka – Contact," last accessed on 14 October 2021, <https://gornicka.com/contact/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Marta Górnicka – Bio".

character of the language/voice/body. They oppose the question on how these can be used for freedom.<sup>4</sup>

For HYMN TO LOVE, the last play in the director's European triptych inspired by *Mother Courage* - one of Bertolt Brecht's most iconic, political plays - Górnicka ensembled a group of twenty-five diverse performers to condemn the hypocrisy of the ruling class and to put back Poland's national, dark history into *collective memory*.<sup>5</sup> The production was renowned and presented during international theatre festivals in several countries including Greece, Austria, Germany, Russia, France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, Czech Republic and Italy.<sup>6</sup> HYMN was more often played abroad than in Poland itself, because of the intense or just superficial reception there. (Trailer on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/RxhSdRQPCyY>)

In this essay I will first talk about the history of the chorus as a performative mechanism of reflection. Thereafter, I will aim to show you how we can link this back onto the radical works and vision of Marta Górnicka and how we can connect her modern concept of the chorus with *artivism*. I will illustrate with the case of HYMN TO LOVE (2017) and the artistic choices the director and her team made there.

## 1. History of the chorus

To start, it is interesting to know that the chorus, more specifically of Classical Greece, lies at the beginning of Western theatre history. "The chorus in Classical Greek drama was a group of actors who described and commented upon the main action of a play with song, dance, and recitation," states the Encyclopaedia Britannica.<sup>7</sup>

On a side note, we must be aware that this history of the Greek chorus may not be the only true beginning of the art of theatre and even choruses itself, but the discourse on the Greek chorus and Western theatre history, I will shortly touch, already says enough to go further on the case of Marta Górnicka.

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<sup>4</sup> "Marta Górnicka - Bio".

<sup>5</sup> Next Festival, "Hymn to love," last accessed on 29 September 2021, <https://nextfestival.eu/nl/evenement/hymn-to-love>; "Gorki - Herbstsalon | Hymn to Love," last accessed on 13 October 2021, <https://www.berliner-herbstsalon.de/en/dritter-berliner-herbstsalon/performances/hymne-an-die-liebe>.

<sup>6</sup> "Marta Górnicka - Bio".

<sup>7</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, s.v. "Chorus," last accessed on 26 October 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/art/chorus-theatre>.

The sacred, carnivalesque festivals Classical Greece held for their gods gave birth to the Greek drama. Especially the *chorus* (here the specific kind of song) sung in honour of the god of wine and fertility, Dionysus had a huge impact on this evolution. The ecstatic *hymns* to Dionysus, the so-called *dithyrambs*, formed the first chorus performances that later developed into the first Greek tragedies, by e.g. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

It is still not certain what the exact goal of the chorus was back then. Some think the chorus was there to present the ideal spectator, even if they do or don't portrait a relevant role such as 'the citizen' in the plot. "(...) the Chorus are not a character in the story; they are there as a reliable point of reference; they are there to hear, to see, and to comment," states e.g. P. H. Vellacott in an article about the chorus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*.<sup>8</sup> Different ancient dramatists used the chorus in their own way.

Later in the *absolute drama*, a term by philologist Peter Szondi (1929-1971), of the 17-19<sup>th</sup> century the dialogue became the only medium between the people. There was no choir, no other songs or quotations. Then with the so-called *epic theatre* of Bertolt Brecht (1868-1956), where alienation i.a. was central, there was a revaluation of the choir, for sung commentary, and choreography. Also, Richard Wagner (1813-1883), known for his term *Gesamtkunstwerk*, discussed Greek drama and the Greek chorus extensively in his writings, including "Art and Revolution", and used it as a model for his ideal theatre.

Now back to the case of Marta Górnicka, she believes the chorus, instead of the individual character, can make a change through theatre.<sup>9</sup> Her radical theatre, where the power of collective language/voice/body is used to touch taboos i.a., may provoke the necessary revolution.<sup>10</sup> "The chorus, the sole protagonist of her performances is always both a critical tool to examine modern mechanisms of control, exclusion and violence, and a vehicle of community," can be read in her online biography.<sup>11</sup> Górnicka creates a modern tragic chorus "that serves as means of critical reflection upon man as shaped by the norms of culture, society, the economy and religion."<sup>12</sup> In the following chapters we will take a closer look on how this is portrait in her works.

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<sup>8</sup> P. H. Vellacott, "The Chorus in 'Oedipus Tyrannus'" *Greece & Rome* 14, n° 2 (1967): 110.

<sup>9</sup> Culture.pl, "Marta Górnicka - Power of the Choir - Video Interview," last accessed on 26 October 2021, <https://culture.pl/en/video/marta-gornicka-power-of-the-choir-video-interview>.

<sup>10</sup> Culture.pl, "Marta Górnicka - Power of the Choir - Video Interview".

<sup>11</sup> "Marta Górnicka - Bio".

<sup>12</sup> "Marta Górnicka - Bio".

## 2. Multitude and the Other

For Górnicka the term *multitude* is key in her radical works. In a conversation with theatre critic A. Adamiecka about her first monographic exhibition called MULTITUDE she said this:

“Multitude is at the very heart of what the chorus is to me. It is its most important principle and the core of its politicality. An instant definition of that term is readily available on Wikipedia, (...): multitude is a term from political philosophy which refers to social movements as organisms of individuals acting together. It means a group of people, a plurality which cannot be classified through any other category than its shared existence. Clearly, this refers directly to the basic principle of the chorus as the sole protagonist and simultaneously a collective of particular, diverse, varied beings.”<sup>13</sup>

And indeed, surprisingly, when I re-searched the image of my laptops wallpaper on Google Images, they directly referred me to the term *social group* (Image 1 & 2). This is exactly what Górnicka’s choruses are, namely a large, heterogenous group of individuals which interacts and collectively has a sense of unity. This contrasts in a way with the ancient Greek chorus, which were often the same sex as the main character and wore masks, and were then thus rather homogenous and non-individualised.<sup>14</sup>

The twenty-five singers on stage in HYMN meanwhile vary in terms of their age, experience, ethnic background, worldview, and were ensembled through an open call (Image 3).<sup>15</sup> With this Górnicka wanted to give the image of an inclusive, open society, which is now slowly being replaced by “a fantasy of a homogenous nation-family, entirely closed off against the Other”.<sup>16</sup> In this energetic play the chorus of Górnicka question this concept of we and the Other, more specifically the Polish people and the immigrants.<sup>17</sup>

Another interesting example is that for the work MOTHER COURAGE WON’T REMAIN SILENT: A CHORUS FOR WARTIME (Tel Aviv, 2014) Górnicka even ensembled groups functioning in radically clashing communities.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> GALLERY WEEKEND BERLIN, “Gornicka in Conversation,” last accessed on 8 October 2021, <https://www.gallery-weekend-berlin.de/journal/gornicka-in-conversation/>.

<sup>14</sup> H. C. Montgomery, “Some Later Uses of the Greek Tragic Chorus,” *The Classical Journal* 38 (3): 148–160.

<sup>15</sup> “Marta Górnicka – George Mitropoulos Interview with Marta Górnicka “VOICE IS FOR ME THE MOST POWERFUL TOOL IN THEATRE,” last accessed on 22 October 2021, <https://gornicka.com/projects/george-mitropoulos-interview-with-marta-gornicka-for-athensepidauros-festival-voice-is-for-me-the-most-powerful-tool-in-theatre/>.

<sup>16</sup> “VOICE IS FOR ME THE MOST POWERFUL TOOL IN THEATRE”.

<sup>17</sup> Next Festival, “Hymn to love”.

<sup>18</sup> “Marta Górnicka – Bio”.

### 3. Language and voice

Górnicka's *libretti* (written text for vocal work) are never just coherent texts. They are always *collages* of songs from pop culture, antique music and other found footage. The libretto of HYMN TO LOVE juxtaposes patriotic, religious, and traditional songs with lyrics of rap music. Internet hate-speech and quotes of fundamentalist fighters, terrorists (including e.g. fragments of Anders Breivik's manifesto 2083), and legitimate politicians are also added to the collage.<sup>19</sup> "Language is always an instrument of a certain ideology, which defines the conditions of each statement: who may be the subject and what their position is, on what conditions they can be heard, which words they can use to speak," says Górnicka in an interview.<sup>20</sup> She uses this ideological language in this libretto to demonstrate the brutal language of today's politics.<sup>21</sup> The songbook "reveals the cruelty of a community bound together by love of the fatherland, in which only its own people exist," it "awakens the collective consciousness," states the director.<sup>22</sup>

The chorus of HYMN TO LOVE does not only sing the libretto, on the contrary, it also shouts, whispers, sings *parlando* (sung in a style suggestive of speech), and speaks. The chorus really plays with the vocal performance of the texts.

"It squeaks, creaks, wheezes, sometimes it becomes too weak to speak and just breathes instead. It utters sentences like a computer, in a fast, portato manner, as if playing them from a tape. It emits sounds like a punk music record, like a computer war game or a porn film. It transforms, exposes, mocks and neutralises language. It compiles films and quotations, piles them up and brings them to absurdity."<sup>23</sup>

Collectively performing text is a main characteristic of the chorus. This communication may be beautifully *harmonized* (e.g. liturgical singing) but can also bring the necessary expressive stress if it is performed with *dissonance* (e.g. *parlando* singing).

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<sup>19</sup> Next Festival, "Hymn to love"; "Gorki - Herbstsalon | Hymn to Love".

<sup>20</sup> "Marta Górnicka – Marta Górnicka in Conversation with Katrin Breschke," last accessed on 26 October 2021, <https://gornicka.com/projects/marta-gornicka-in-conversation-with-katrin-breschke/>.

<sup>21</sup> "Gorki - Herbstsalon | Marta Górnicka," last accessed on 13 October 2021, <https://www.berliner-herbstsalon.de/en/vierter-berliner-herbstsalon/artist/marta-gornicka>.

<sup>22</sup> "Marta Górnicka – HYMN TO LOVE," last accessed on 26 October 2021, <https://gornicka.com/projects/hymn-to-love/>; "VOICE IS FOR ME THE MOST POWERFUL TOOL IN THEATRE".

<sup>23</sup> "Marta Górnicka – Conversation with Katrin Breschke".

Marta gives a good example in an interview: “In HYMN, the chorus sings with pride: “Us Poles, we have the only Saviour behind us, the Saviour of the World, what should we be afraid of?!” And as the chorus repeats this supposedly soothing phrase, it becomes more and more frightened, more and more aggressive.”<sup>24</sup> “In the songs and marches, we can find an element which connects the community, but also an element of violence and death of the community. The ecstatic pleasure of singing together may also be a pleasure of eliminating others,” states Górnicka in another interview.<sup>25</sup>

Górnicka often also divides the chorus-group in sub-groups that perform different texts or differently (e.g. in canon or shouting) to create tensions. The fluid borders of order and chaos are played with thanks to these diverse techniques Górnicka uses. For other works, like e.g. GRUNDGESETZ (Berlin, 2018), she uses the term *stresstest* to describe these kinds of tension performances.<sup>26</sup>

The director thereby developed a method of vocal-acting training for breath/voice/body, in the aim of finding an organic voice. According to this method she has led many drama workshops around the globe.<sup>27</sup> The voice as an instrument of expression makes it possible to deliver certain ideas/ideals to the spectator. Even when they don't speak the specific language and thus need to read the subtitles for that, they feel the tensions. This shows how strong the medium is to multiple people around the globe.

#### 4. Image and body

If we look at the scenography and costumery of HYMN TO LOVE we can state that Górnicka and her team chose for a rather minimalistic and earthy image, which may still represent a huge thing (Image 4). The director - as said earlier - wants to put back the dark history of her country into collective memory. She does this by portraying certain images in this setting. The play ends for example with the (direct) representation of an orchestra playing

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<sup>24</sup> “Marta Górnicka – Fascism Is Not Just a Historical Period. It Is Happening Here and Now – Przemek Bollin Interview with Marta Górnicka ( ONET.PL),” last accessed on 26 October 2021, <https://gornicka.com/projects/fascism-is-not-just-a-historical-period-it-is-happening-here-and-now-interview-przemek-bollin-with-marta-gornicka-onet-pl/>.

<sup>25</sup> “VOICE IS FOR ME THE MOST POWERFUL TOOL IN THEATRE”.

<sup>26</sup> Gorki, “Grundgesetz Ein Chorischer Stresstest von Marta Górnicka,” last accessed on 29 October 2021, <https://www.gorki.de/en/grundgesetz>.

<sup>27</sup> “Marta Górnicka – Bio”.

in a concentration camp during the Holocaust (Image 5 & 6). Górnicka said in an interview about her vision on the play the following:

“Without the memory of her history, Europe is doomed to repeat the monstrous crimes and neglect. This perspective is very important for my country, where critical work involving the hardest historical experiences was replaced with an ideology of heroic victimhood, which today feeds nationalistic claims. This is why I build my message about today’s refugee crisis around the image of an orchestra playing in a concentration camp during the Holocaust. Although, this time, the orchestra is not playing at the ramp in Auschwitz, but on the border, the place where Europe “defines” who “is qualified” to live here, and who is merely qualified to die at the gates of “paradise”.<sup>28</sup>

The image setting in an extermination camp and the subject of the Holocaust becomes for her a starting point to address the threads of nationalist tendencies growing in Europe and the migration crisis.<sup>29</sup> The images are “shown to the audience right in the face, violently, harshly.”<sup>30</sup> But even when you didn’t know e.g. this image reference while watching the play, these earthly colours and harsh textures may still represented a certain darkness.

Not only the colours and textures of the scenography and costumery represents this image, also the minimalistic, rhythmic choreographies in it have great expression abilities. For example, there is a huge marching-scene – as seen in the trailer on YouTube - where most of the chorus hums while marching and one woman keeps screaming “march”.<sup>31</sup> There are also moments where they suddenly come together in a certain formation that reminds of liturgical images (Image 7). In this sense is the body - as the voice – a strong instrument of expression.

Even if you don’t understand the language/voice – as also said earlier for the vocal elements – the spectator could still get the expression. Only the *politics of the body*, what Zeynep Gambetti talks about in his work *Occupy Gezi as Politics of the Body*, then remain to raise social awareness.<sup>32</sup> The “performativity of the body that crosses language without

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<sup>28</sup> “VOICE IS FOR ME THE MOST POWERFUL TOOL IN THEATRE”.

<sup>29</sup> “Marta Górnicka – HYMN TO LOVE”.

<sup>30</sup> “Marta Górnicka – Fascism”.

<sup>31</sup> Maxim Gorki Theater, “Hymne an die Liebe (Trailer),” last accessed on 28 October 2021, <https://youtu.be/RxhSdRQPCyY>.

<sup>32</sup> Zeynep Gambetti, “Occupy Gezi as Politics of the Body” In Umut Özkırmılı (ed), *The Making of a Protest Movement in Turkey: #Occupygezi*, Palgrave Pivot (2014): 89-102.

ever quite reducing to language” may say as much as the content of the vocally performed libretto itself.<sup>33</sup>

## 5. Artivism

For the fact that Górnicka uses her art (form) for activism we could link her work with the term *artivism*, the portmanteau word combining *art* and *activism* (Image 8). M. K. Asante writes of the *artist* in a chapter on activism in the book *It's Bigger Than Hip Hop* that “(T)he artist merges commitment to freedom and justice with the pen, the lens, the brush, the voice, the body, and the imagination. The artist knows that to make an observation is to have an obligation.”<sup>34</sup> We could say that Marta Górnicka is an artist.

Finally, the aesthetics of the chorus can thereby be found in the aesthetics of resistance. For example, in protest we will find the same rhythmic, choreographic movements and texts sung/shouted in unison. The power of collective language/voice/body can be felt during these protests. Here is the term *multitude* also applicable. The protesters often form that same large, heterogeneous group which has a sense of unity. See for example the case of Gezi protest, where several social groups stood together as one.

## Conclusion

In short, we could conclude that Marta Górnicka, as a so-called *artist*, uses her new theatrical concept of the chorus for activism, namely to portrait certain ideals to the spectator. She wants to put things back into collective memory by representing things harshly on stage. The well use of the three expressive elements language/voice/body is central here. And even if some of these elements are (more) difficult to understand, the spectator could still feel the tensions.

For further research, we could examine the case of Marta Górnicka in the discourse of *ritualism*, as the history of the chorus begun by the ritual, the *dithyrambs* for Dionysus,

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<sup>33</sup> J. Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies Web Journal*, last accessed on 28 October 2021, <http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>.

<sup>34</sup> M. K. Asante, *It's Bigger than Hip-Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation* New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2008.

and still has elements connecting ritualism. Theories of e.g. Richard Schechner, founder of the Performance Studies, and Friedrich Nietzsche could then be applied. Also, a closer look to the resemblance with the aesthetics of resistance and the discourse on *artivism* is recommended.

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## Illustrations:

**Image 1:** Marta Górnicka, *HYMN TO LOVE*, s.d., all rights reserved. Image from: Vadirut The First, 'Какой год без театральных итогов? С небольшим опозданием, но вот они; будто сегодня 12 декабря'. Last accessed on 4 October 2021, <https://vadirutthefirst.livejournal.com/239764.html>.



**Image 2:** Screenshot from Google.com. Image from: Screenshot by author.

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**Social group - Wikipedia**  
In the social sciences, a **social group** can be defined as two or more people who interact with one another, share similar characteristics, and collectively ...

[https://www.britannica.com/topic/social\\_group](https://www.britannica.com/topic/social_group) topic Vertaal deze pagina  
**Social group | Britannica**  
**Social group**, any set of human beings who either are, recently have been, or anticipate being in some kind of interrelation. The term group, or **social group** ...

**Groep** ◀  
Sociologie 

Een groep is een verzameling van twee of meer personen die met elkaar omgaan. Dit kan zijn omdat zij zich met elkaar identificeren of omdat zij een gezamenlijk doel hebben. [Wikipedia](#)

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**Image 3:** Marta Górnicka, *HYMN TO LOVE*, s.d., all rights reserved. Image from: Magdalena Wałdoch (Management of Marta Górnicka), email to the author, 13 October 2021.



**Image 4:** Marta Górnicka, *HYMN TO LOVE*, s.d., all rights reserved. Image from: Magdalena Wałdoch (Management of Marta Górnicka), email to the author, 13 October 2021.



**Image 5:** Das Orchester der im Lager gefangenen Musiker spielt den "Todestango". Im Takt dazu werden Folterungen und Hinrichtungen vollzogen. Image from: Last accessed on 28 October 2021, [https://www.theaterspektakel.ch/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Festival\\_2018/PDFs/ZTS\\_Abendzettel\\_Marta\\_Gornicka.pdf](https://www.theaterspektakel.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/Festival_2018/PDFs/ZTS_Abendzettel_Marta_Gornicka.pdf).



**Image 6:** Marta Górnicka, *HYMN TO LOVE*, s.d., all rights reserved. Image from: Magdalena Waldoch (Management of Marta Górnicka), email to the author, 13 October 2021.



**Image 7:** Marta Górnicka, *HYMN TO LOVE*, s.d., all rights reserved. Image from: Magdalena Wałdoch (Management of Marta Górnicka), email to the author, 13 October 2021.



**Image 8:** Marta Górnicka, *HYMN TO LOVE*, s.d., all rights reserved. Image from: Magdalena Wałdoch (Management of Marta Górnicka), email to the author, 13 October 2021.

