

The Astra Choir in Bucharest

“vor veni mulți de la răsărit și de la apus...”

(many will come from the East and West...)

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“Le moral, c’est le travelling”, said the film-maker Jean-Luc Godard. The idea of the journey, then, has a special importance in modern consciousness? Even a humble choir, travelling from Melbourne to Bucharest, could seek meaning in this question. The “thematics of mobility”, as the scholar Tony Pinkney called them, underlie a change in early 20th-century thought. “Sailing to Byzantium” by Yeats is one of many titles – of poems, novels – where the preposition “to” replaces the 19th-century “and”. But two centuries before any modernists, or James Joyce or Flann O’Brien, there was also the Anglo-Irish writer Laurence Sterne, whose digressive novels are in continuous travel, with more departures than arrivals.

Music itself is a natural traveller in many senses, literal and metaphoric, starting with its fluid moment-to-moment nature: many musical works are best conceived as a journey. Jean-Luc Godard himself was using the foreign word “le travelling” in a specific and technical sense from film composition – namely the “tracking shot”, the movement of the camera in relation to the object. But this too offers a powerful metaphor for musical situations – a Brahms coda, a Stravinsky ballet scene... Lacking specific verbal or visual meanings, music flows into other genres – poetry, theatre and ritual. It also transports itself into different ways of perceiving the world – the sacred, the profane, the political, the communal, the personal. More literally, the travels of musicians have become part of the movement of musical history – Heinrich Schütz to Venice, Arnold Schönberg to America, and of course, the Astra Choir to Venice and Bucharest!

The 21st century has other preoccupations than those of modernism. One of the most important is also about *places* – the contest between the globalized, general world and the local and specific. Robert Kaplan’s book *The Revenge of Geography* places this question in the centre of international politics and the conflicts to come. Musicians do not seek conflict, but find much stimulus in the power of particular places. Any foreign musician coming to Romania will be deeply interested to know how the specifics of East European materials and history are part of Romanian composition, as well as how Romanian musical thought contributed to and illuminated the wider international heritage.

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All these general questions formed a background for the project of the Astra Choir from Melbourne, Australia, to travel to the Veneto and Friuli regions of Italy, and to Bucharest, for a series of concerts in October-November 2014. Over more than three decades, our choir of 35-40 voices has developed a style of concert programs that

combine new and older repertoire from many places – asking questions of each other and integrated into one event. With choral music, the building in which the concert is performed can itself become part of the discussion, with movements of singers and sounds within its acoustic. The animation of the architectural space animates the historical and geographic space of the repertoire – with the aspiration to project a hermeneutic beyond the identities of the individual musical works.

For some years, we have developed special relationships with composers in Italy and Romania. Thus the central aim of these travelling concerts was to bring together music of our three respective regions of the earth, to introduce Romanian music to Italy, and Italian music to Romania. Two figures were important points of reference: in Italy, Riccardo Vaglini, composition professor at the Venice Conservatorium, publisher, and director of explorative contemporary festivals in Venice and in Camino al Tagliamento (Friuli); and Dan Dediú, also so influential as a teaching figure in addition to his own practice as a composer. Contemporary work from Australasia was transported to both countries, including not just compositions but also the explorative performances of the Astra Improvising Choir, a group of specialist improvisers within the main choir, under the direction of my colleague Joan Pollock. Their extended vocal techniques grow out of special sources in geography and culture – the sounds of Australian rain-forest, the *kecak* chant from Bali, contemporary choral harmony, and *pelog* melody from Java.

The choir travelled with a repertoire of around 40 pieces – each concert program extracting a different sub-set to create a mosaic that crossed between works of varying style and origin. Sometimes the programs also criss-crossed between sacred and secular culture, although the Bucharest concert was more concentrated on the sacred domain. From Romania, Italy and Australasia there were up to 10 pieces each, representing a range of generations from younger student composers to established figures of the last half-century.

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It was in this environment that the choir gave the final concert of its tour on November 14 at the Catholic Cathedral of St Joseph, by kind permission of the Bishop and with the friendly cooperation of the Cathedral's Kapellmeister Marcel Costea and his associate Mihai Murariu. Hosted jointly by the National University of Music (UNMB) and the Union of Composers and Musicologists (UCMR), the program was able to display a span of Romanian composition – from Mihai Murariu, Dan Dediú, Marcel Octav Costea, Livia Teodorescu-Ciocănea and Dan Buciu – in antiphonies with some characteristic Italian pieces – from Riccardo Vaglini, Filippo Perocco and Gianluca Geremia – and with Australian work, including some hints of nocturnal forest birds as well as Javanese melody. This contemporary mosaic was set among older works, from Arnold Schönberg, Verdi, Gesualdo, Clemens non Papa, and Heinrich Schütz, whose motet in motion opened the program with its signature text: “Many will come from the East and West”.

In this and the six previous concerts in Venice, Treviso and Camino (Friuli), the audience might take away, as part of the experience, a question. Is regional sensibility

a given quality, and an overriding one across generations of composers? The Romanian pieces in our Bucharest program suggested some unity of purpose as well as variety of realization, within the thorough hand-craft which is itself a Romanian tradition. The unity might be perceived in original re-coordinations of linear and harmonic forces inherited from multiple traditions of the modal and tonal past. Mihai Murariu's *Rugăciune* (2012) is an adaptation of a remarkable text of conciliation that originated from a situation *in extremis*, the concentration camp in Ravensbrück. At its centre is a dramatic chromaticized modal harmony for full choir, from which fugal melodic lines seem to unravel, in the preceding female voices that open and lead into it, and the male voices that carry it to the close. Livia Teodorescu-Ciocănea creates textural and harmonic layers from chant lines of explicitly more Western or more Eastern character in *Oratio* (2001), her setting of the mediaeval cult figure, St Bridget. Marcel Octav Costea's early *Tantum Ergo* (1989) frames its liturgical setting in familiar tonal phrases which, not unlike the late Verdi of the concert, pass through a series of enharmonic doors to create a pathway of some mystery for its text. Dan Buciu shows mastery of the smallest dimensions in his non-invasive lullaby setting from Iași, *Aidi Nani, Puiu Mami*. This miniature three and four-voice creation had a special impact in the Italian concerts, where it was joined by Dan Buciu's choral realization of the chilling and ambiguous lines of *Frica* by Nichita Stănescu, an opportunity to introduce the poet to audiences in Italy and Australia.

As against these Romanian choral creations, Italian composers are perhaps more inclined to exploit the pure sonic, sensual dimensions of musical space, including the power of sound to slow down texts, sacred and secular, towards a state of contemplation. As one example from the Bucharest concert, Riccardo Vaglini's work *Nuvole (Clouds)* – which was given its world premiere by the Astra Choir in Melbourne in 2013 – creates a slowly-moving choral formation from the lines of the contemporary Friuli poet, Pierluigi Cappello. The poem's images of accumulations – of cloud-forms in the sky and syllables on the page – are traced out in Vaglini's characteristic looping sound patterns.

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Among the mostly short compositions of the Bucharest concert, one longer work, of nearly a half-hour duration, had a place of special importance in the program, in the touring project as a whole, and in the recent history of the Astra Choir. It is Dan Dediu's *Stabat Mater, 10 madrigals for choir*, based on techniques of the madrigals of Gesualdo and of the late *Sacri Pezzi* by Verdi.

Dan Dediu himself in a recent essay has used the metaphor “experimental pirate boardings” to describe one way that musical inspirations are acquired. The case of his two choral works *Stabat Mater* (1995), and *Lux Aeterna, Concerto for Mezzo-Soprano and Choir* (1996), was equally an example of “buried treasure”, which I was privileged to discover in an early meeting with him while visiting Bucharest in 2008/9. Neither of these works from the 1990s had ever been performed complete, and to some extent had been regarded by the composer as exercises in harmonic writing rather than practical works for performance. Along with a third work from the same period, the *Harmonic Labyrinth and Fugue* (1999), they formed an astonishing

trio of choral works, each performed in Melbourne from new score editions prepared there, each greeted by singers and audiences with delight and some amazement.

When a full study of Dan Dediu's music comes to be written, these choral works may be seen as significant incubators for the development of his style into the new century. More broadly, they may come to be regarded as a major contribution to the European choir repertoire of the time. The last decades of the 20th century were quite a rich period for choral composition, particularly in countries with a strong and widespread contemporary choir culture – the Scandinavian countries, the UK and Germany. But whereas much of this new choral writing tended to work with *one* kind of harmonic sound, with progressions within it and with skilful textural manipulations of it, Dan Dediu's three choral essays create *multiple* kinds of harmonic sound, with progressions within and between them. We may recognize in these works historical layers and affinities – Dufay, Bach, Reger, Messiaen – but the effect is never of pastiche or neo-classic irony. The two models for the *Stabat Mater*, Gesualdo (in his late madrigals) and Verdi (in his late choral pieces with the “scala enigmatica”), were both superb technicians of a well-established style, who pushed it towards new modes of continuity and succession in this last phase of their composing. With his *Stabat Mater* and the other choral works, Dan Dediu creates different musical “presences”, and movements between them, which likewise suggest new and original paths for choral writing.

For the Astra Choir, it was indeed satisfying to transport the much-travelled *Stabat Mater* back to Romania for its first full performance in its country of origin. And the process of “le travelling” continues into the new year, when Dan Dediu's work will be published, along with other works from our Bucharest concert, by Ars Publica in Italy. At the same time, in T.S. Eliot's words, “we shall not cease from exploration”. One very significant benefit much appreciated by members of the choir was to encounter the city of Bucharest itself, as well as such specific contacts as those of the musicologists within the choir with their colleagues at the UNMB. The long “tracking shot” of the Astra Choir's week in Bucharest will prompt more travels into Romanian music, in its multiple layers of generations, from the present day back into the past.

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