

## From the sound of material to sound material: Andreas Suberg's Leonardo Cycle

His endless curiosity and his ability to intellectually grasp unfathomed phenomena by examining them minutely made Leonardo da Vinci a legend during his lifetime. His range of interests which included music, painting and sculpture, engineering, architecture, astronomy and anatomy and, of course, mathematics, was considered so unprecedented that in his posthumous biographical sketches Giorgio Vasari referred to Leonardo's capabilities as »a gift of God«<sup>1</sup>. Similarly legendary during his lifetime were Leonardo's failures. Many could be ascribed to the political circumstances of his time, yet not rarely were they the result of his intellectual restlessness. For instance, Vasari postulated that Leonardo »would have been very proficient in his early lessons if he had not been so volatile and inconstant; for he was always setting himself to learn many things only to abandon them almost immediately«<sup>2</sup>.

Volatility and inconstancy are characteristics of modern man who makes his first appearance on the stage of history in the political turmoil and cultural transformation of the Renaissance in the form of figures such as Leonardo da Vinci. In the case of Leonardo da Vinci, Renaissance man's modernity is reflected in the individual's irreconcilable contradictions: he painted the Mona Lisa, perhaps the most famous picture in the history of art, yet at times took the view that painting was an imposition that distracted him from his relevant research interests. Long before the triumphant advance of modern science, Leonardo closely observed and systematically described phenomena such as the flight of birds and the functioning of the human body, yet towards the end of his life he appeared incapable of systematically publishing his research. According to Vasari, Leonardo, »an artist of outstanding beauty who displayed infinite grace in everything he did«<sup>3</sup>, would excel in entertaining courtly elites. On the other hand, in her Leonardo biography Antonia Vallentin presents him as a person who quickly tired of social life and withdrew from it. Leonardo da Vinci devised his Prophecies in the 1580s and 1590s as entertainment for the court of the Sforzas. Evidence of Leonardo's inner conflict, they were the inspiration for this cycle by Andreas H. H. Suberg. Set in the future, these enigmatic allegories and satires were intended as riddles to entertain listeners in witty, surprising or dire and ominous ways. Their author recommended that they should be presented as though by a madman — a rewarding suggestion for a composer attracted by the texts, and one that Suberg realised in the elation and overexcitedness of the countertenor. At the same time, enigma and exaltation provided Leonardo with the artificial protective space that enabled him to use the genre for biting criticism of his age. There are a total of 166 riddles, most of them marginal notes in Leonardo's codices. In them he castigates the social inequities of his age, the craving for property and money, the perversion of the Christian message of salvation and the exploitation and destruction of nature and its living creatures. Surprisingly, the numinous element in his riddles always turns out to be some commonplace. This ostensibly entertaining testimony to his function as courtier, and hence servant, provides an insight into Leonardo's conflict with the conventions of his time. According to Antonia Vallentin, his prophecies open a window onto the intense

---

<sup>1</sup> Vasari, Giorgio: *Künstler der Renaissance*, Köln 2002, p. 342

<sup>2</sup> Vasari, Giorgio: *Künstler der Renaissance*, Köln 2002, p. 344

<sup>3</sup> Vasari, Giorgio: *Künstler der Renaissance*, Köln 2002, p. 342

misanthropy under the surface of Leonardo's calmness.<sup>4</sup> »It almost seems as if Leonardo used the freedom allowed him by this game as an opportunity to express everything unspoken and suppressed.«<sup>5</sup> To dedicate oneself to these texts means coming closer to Leonardo's time and his person with all its innate convictions. But as the essence of prophecy lies in looking to the future, there is no question but that our present may also be receptive to these texts.

Andreas Suberg came across them when involved with the intellectual world and ideas of Joseph Beuys. In the early 1990s he worked with his mentor, the Beuys patron and collector Franz Joseph van der Grinten, on a catalogue project about Beuys's *Plastische Theorie*. This cooperation also laid the corner stone for his continuous preoccupation with Leonardo's writings. One result was *Stigmata* [3] for Trumpet and Percussion (1994), the first of the ten compositions presented here. Expanding on Prophecy 27, *Delle scolture*, an aphorism that employs the image of the crucified Redeemer, Suberg derives the structure of his instrumental composition from the geometric figure of the pentagram, which, in Christian emblematics, signifies the five wounds of Christ. In 2005–06, he applied to Leonardo's Prophecy 19, *I dadi* [7], a similarly structural musical interpretation. This prophecy on dice, too, is nothing more than a short aphorism. Since John Cage's use of the *I Ching*, operations of coincidents have been an effective tool of western composition. Suberg developed playing instructions for the application of the material of the piece with the help of four-, six-, eight-, ten- and twelve-sided dice. Each throw of the dice is at the same time a percussive event. Thus, in *I dadi* Suberg requires that his three musicians also be dice players on stage. In a total of five interludes they perform at a dice board whose surface is video projected onto the wall. In addition, with the help of delays, the composer processes and condenses the sounds of these multimedia interludes. Here, one dice named in the text turns into a sound generator, thus giving the musical interpretation of this piece two distinct meanings. By identifying the dice in the video as a source of sound, the sound production remains descriptive, vivid and sensually experienced while, at the same time, live electronic processing detaches the sounds as 'objets sonores' from their source. This lends a specific acousmatic aesthetic to the musical adaptation.

The titles of the texts selected by Suberg, for instance *De' Metalli (On Metals)* [1], *Delle campanelle (On Bells)* [9] or *Delle pelle (On Skins)* [4 / 5] already constitute to some degree a percussive programme. As Leonardo, an architect, engineer and sculptor, probably had a great affinity for all kinds of materials, an affinity that he would share today with every dedicated percussionist and composer. Where appropriate, Suberg naturally incorporates the materials mentioned in the chosen titles in his instrumentation. Thus, the electronic layer in *Delle pelle I* [4] is based in its entirety on the sound drawn from the skin of a frame drum. In Prophecy 29, Leonardo speaks of the part played by animal skin in parchment. Accordingly, the sonic texture is enriched by adding of the fricative sound of a small skin drum: Suberg's score directs countertenor Daniel Gloger to trace the lettering of the text on the drumhead with his finger. Here, allusion to the act of writing on parchment acquires rhythmic character. *De' metalli* [1], the longest of the texts chosen by Suberg and the one that comes closest to the apocalyptic character of prophecy, castigates cupidity for gold and metals as the source of social upheaval; already then

---

<sup>4</sup> Vallentin, Antonia: Leonardo Da Vinci, München 1951, p. 180

<sup>5</sup> Vallentin, Antonia: Leonardo Da Vinci, München 1951, p. 179

Leonardo condemns the drastic impairments of environmental degradation that has always been associated with mining. Here the metallic sounds of cymbals and tamtam serve as the starting material of an electronic layer that passes back and forth between percussion and singing. Similar to the rhythm of the writing in *Delle pelle I*, in *De' metalli* the metallic sounds are counterpointed by tom-tom drums beaten to the rhythm of the spoken text.

There is, of course, far more to Suberg's compositions than just the realisation of the numerous sonic suggestions in the texts. His on-going preoccupation with the Prophecies since 1994 touches on a topic that is now particularly sensitive, even explosive, in the light of the recent recrudescence of populism in whose slipstream objective discourse has been displaced by conspiracy theory and irrationalism. The composer emphasises that the Prophecies that fascinate him are the texts that have contemporary relevance. His selection leaves no doubt that he too is making moral statements that have nothing in common with the speculative, occult mumblings of any pseudoscientific history of ideas that confuses philology with conspiracy theory. Some of the texts, for instance *Delle spade e lance (On Swords and Lances)* [8], that condemn the denunciation and threat of military force, are always topical and must, regrettably, be regarded as timeless. Obviously, the sound of metal also plays a role here. What Suberg imagines, however, are not the acoustics of the tumult of battle, but the rhythm of work in the smithies as they forged the weapons of war in Leonardo's time. An electroacoustic process melts the sound of hammers striking an anvil and blows on steel pipes of different lengths into a polymetric mesh of various striking and working rhythms. Similarly, in *Delle bombarde* [10] the composer avoids the musical presentation of a military scenario. Suberg did not regard Leonardo's prophecy on bombardments as an opportunity for programmatic rendering of artillery fire. Whereas today sirens are supposed to warn us of imminent attacks on our cities, in previous centuries church bells fulfilled this function. Hence, *Delle bombarde* is underlaid with the electroacoustic derivative of the sounds of bells. The sound of the Hosanna bell in Freiburg's cathedral serves to generate the metallic tonal texture that culminates, mark you, in the bell tolling 13 times. For the composer this thirteenth stroke which would be impossible under normal circumstances, represents a world that is in disarray.

Whereas some of Leonardo's prophecies evoke a state of emergency in time of war, texts such as Prophecy 23 on *Balls for Play* [5] fit surprisingly well into our everyday life. Here Suberg sets Leonardo's lines in the context of modern football, that commercial mass spectacle which can be interpreted as the sublimation of military conflict. Accordingly, his musical interpretation does not evoke a mood of euphoria. The musical happening sporadically recites the singing of fans in stadiums and is underlaid with a vague, threatening rumbling, an electroacoustic pass consisting of fan songs, game commentary and spectators' reactions taken during the 2002 Football World Cup. Leonardo's Prophecy 28, *On the Human Mouth, Which Is a Tomb* [6], is also and astonishingly topical. Nowadays, we know that methane emissions from cattle farming are a considerable factor in climate change. Therefore, Leonardo, a vegetarian, makes us sit up when he postulates that people's eructations are a consequence of eating meat, and goes on to point out that the methods of meat production treat life with contempt. Suberg's musical interpretation focuses on the moment of eructation. The percussive, pulsing background of the piece is an exclusively electroacoustic transformation of the sounds of digestion. This part of the cycle is expanded to encompass multimedia: during the piece the countertenor

Daniel Gloger holds a small hand camera that projects an oversized image of his mouth on the wall.

*Delle campanelle* [9] a protest against unquestioned habits, is thematically related to the Prophecy *On the Human Mouth* ... Surprisingly, Leonardo's Prophecy 82 criticises the use of cowbells on the ground that they are far too close to the animals' ears. In so doing, he criticises an agricultural practice 500 years before animal-rights activists claim to have identified the use of cowbells as a massive, and thus ecologically questionable, stress factor in cattle breeding. The response of livestock owners is that bells help to keep track of the whereabouts of the animals and have been an acoustic element of our cultural landscape for centuries. As a consequence, Suberg composed a musical soundscape in which a field recording of random ringing of a herd of cattle was phonorealistically replicated on musical cowbells (cencerros). Together with the sound of an Alpine horn and the sporadically inserted yodelling technique in the voice the composer evokes an Alpine landscape with its mountain pastures.

Suberg's musical interpretations prove that these short text structures can be interpreted in various dimensions. The choice of countertenor is a reminder of Renaissance musical practice and simultaneously a musical interpretation of the performance instructions handed down by Leonardo. Time and again the enigmatic objects in the riddles are the source of material sounds, which meant in effect that Suberg had little choice but to favour percussion. Beyond its semantic meaning even the language appears as a sonic object rhythmically placed into some of the musical pieces. But it was only the exegesis of the texts that turned these material sounds into sound material ready for transformation through musical interpretation. Leonardo's Prophecies have often been rated as trivial, and they very probably do refer to popular sayings and writing of his time. Here, in accordance with Freud's theory of humour, the discrepancy between the portrayal of a phenomenon as ominous and its resolution as banal and everyday is usually resolved in laughter about the joke. However, Andreas Suberg's musical interpretations demonstrate that the ostensible weakness of the Prophecies is an advantage. As these texts basically lack any speculative and prophetic element, they are safe from any esoteric interpretation. Suberg's musical interpretation, on the other hand, which took as its starting point the texts' immanent sonic suggestions, turns Leonardo's texts into objects that, not unlike short haikus, provide the occasion for a deeper intellectual contemplation of phenomena that are virulent equally in our time.

Hubert Steins

english translation: Sandra Eades