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Chaya Czernowin: Conversations and Interludes

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Time, timbre, and text become inextricable in Chaya Czernowin's compositional style. The article includes interview dialogue between Czernowin and the author exploring the composer's use of text, her vocal style, issues related to form, and her approaches to rhythm and time in several works, including Maim, Pnima, Za'ide/Adama, and Esh (Fire). Czernowin also discusses the blending of intuitive and analytical compositional approaches integral to her mature style. In interludes between the dialogues the author focuses on Czernowin's earliest published composition Monoalchadia, tracking early explorations of textual fragmentation and transformation, contrapuntal 'piling' as a compositional technique, and the blending of timbre and text through time.

Keywords: Czernowin; Monoalchadia; Esh; Pnima; Maim; Za'ide/Adama

One experiences the musical fabric of Chaya Czernowin as a dense, deftly woven set of intricate strands of sonic materials that are themselves the product of interwoven micro-sonic events. It is a fabric that can stretch and wrap and layer, as if created in an enormously complex loom. Much has been written about the complex details of her work, and in her article in this journal she outlines her current thinking about the human voice and its utterances. But when I met with Czernowin in July 2015 my goal was to focus on large scale issues in her work—the textures of the whole—in hopes that the genesis of her thinking, and an integrative approach to her work with texts, might be initiated.

Musicologist Suzanne Cusick posited that a composer's experience may be revealed in its eccentricities (Cusick, 1994, p. 13); in Czernowin's world the work's identity emerges as a result of those collected processes that, in her case, are the work. These processes blend text, time, and timbre; together they manifest the eccentric, identifying richness of her compositional experience.

LINDA DUSMAN: It strikes me that it is very difficult to talk about your use of text apart from your treatment of time and timbre. So I want to frame this conversation around the interaction of timbre, time, and text in your work. For me, the way you problematize time is fascinating, and seems to connect in important ways to your use of texts. Then again, timbre seems to be an outgrowth of time. Some of your choices about even basic instrumentation reflect this. So, let us start with time.

CHAYA CZERNOWIN: I would say that I have used a few approaches to time in my music. One example is the integrative approach, in which I take things that are very different from each other (two or more things) and either just put them together, or make them react to each other when putting them together. As a result I can either integrate them or separate them. So, I work with oppositions: separate or integrate, merge or distinguish. Let's say I start with a few separate strains of time superimposed, and these strains then branch out. This is not exactly contrapuntal, but there is an element of contrapuntal thinking here because I start with separate elements that are at first independent, and then are brought into some kind of simultaneity. They can branch from each other, or react to one another. The result is more like a piling up of independent time-strains. There is a big difference between this process and traditional counterpoint because when piling, when you have strands of things on top of each other, there is a kind of bleeding among the original elements. It is actually an integrative approach rather than a contrapuntal one, since things end up really influencing each other, whether willingly or unwillingly.

DUSMAN: Do you compose that 'influence?' Or would you say that you 'allow' it to happen?

CZERNOWIN: That is a very beautiful question. So, one could say, do you build the influence in a kind of didactic way, do you write a line and then you add another line that will operate in a certain way to change the original line? But that's not exactly what happens. Many times there would be a line, and the line by itself already contains actually three strands of operations, three strands of strategies towards time. And I have to observe this line to realize what it's doing, and to realize that, actually, I don't have one line only, but I have three things that are braided, or leaning onto each other, accumulating ... and I have to take all of them into account when I am continuing.

DUSMAN: How did you first develop this concept?

CZERNOWIN: In the 90s, I was testing and researching. I was preoccupied with identity. And identity, in terms of melodic thinking, has a lot to do with: What is the line? What is one strand of the line? Is it divided or is it comprised of several strands? Or is it one isolated strand? I worked on this in two ways. One was orchestration, and I have

written a lot about it: taking three instruments and making them into a meta-instrument. In a way I did the same thing with time. So that, for example, I would compose one musical sentence, then cut it to very small pieces, and kind of mix them up. In order to do this successfully, in the original line, there should be a very strong continuity and drama, so that the cutting will have a meaning. Later, I would cut the same line or a different line into much bigger pieces, and reorganize them, mixing the pieces. Here, then, are three processes by which I can refract and unify the texture; one refraction would pertain to time, another refraction would pertain to the line, and the third would pertain to the instruments carrying the line. Those are very powerful microscopes by which I can really focus my intuition and work analytically on things that are very loaded emotionally.

Interlude 1: The earliest work in Czernowin's catalogue is her 1988 composition Manoalchadia, a setting of two Hebrew love poems by Endad Eldan (1980) for two sopranos and bass flute. The two poems are from Eldan's collection Kola male histaklut: 'Kola Male Histaklut' and 'Nagua.' In the notes for the piece, she wrote, 'Gradually in the course of the piece, all three disparate forces integrate into one 'musical body.' Though the singers have different texts, gradually, and with great energy they begin to merge, both through the use of similar vowels and consonants, and as a result of similar 'suggestions' of tones (here I use 'suggestion' as there are many glissandi) (Czernowin, 1988, pp. 15–16). Eventually all three performers arrive on the tone B (17). From this point on, all performers integrate their musical utterances, completing a trajectory initiated through text fragmentation that, though obscured, has a clear and somewhat traditional textual and emotional meaning. This would appear to be another kind of 'genesis'—perhaps the first time that Czernowin actualized the 'identity' available in a 'divided line comprised of individual strands.' In Manoalchadia this idea evolved in the context of a small chamber work; over the course of her career this idea would evolve into massive sonorities and forms (Figure 1).

DUSMAN: Then how does that translate into larger units? If you're thinking about sections or areas that are surrounded by silence, or a complete duration, how does that kind of thinking work? Or does it happen the other way around? Do you think about the large scale dimensions first?

CZERNOWIN: Not really. Well it depends ... While those two ways of thinking, which have to do with the branching out and unifying, are really types of strategies regarding material, I think that what is really important for me, and what I always fought for, is that every piece will find its own form in the way that it is 'right' only to the specific piece. And I did find later, that I had developed some archetypes that I started to repeat. But it took me a long time to realize this and once I did realize it, of course, I worked on changing my approach to avoid the development of such archetypes.

DUSMAN: Do you think they become habits, then?

CZERNOWIN: Yes. There are some kinds of habits. But in terms of the mechanical, the branching, distinguishing, and unifying, melding, and refracting, they are really ways of progressing in time. They're really moves in time. They really respond to each other in the smallest detail, and they also respond formally.

But with all that being said, I think that every piece does suggest something very different, because every piece has almost like an atom of thinking. Which is not like a motive, it is more like a metaphor, it's a comprised field with its own seed of unique identity, and every piece grows on that specific field.

DUSMAN: There is an organic feeling about your music that is quite beautiful, and I can hear that in it: that you're not imposing a form from the outside, but that the music is growing out of your deliberate work with the materials, is that correct?

CZERNOWIN: That's completely correct. But that is why there are so many different forms. If you look at nature, if you look at the form of the branch, you look at the flower—it's impossible to find two that are identical. So definitely when you look at one kind of tree, and another kind of tree, each of them is very coherent by itself, but very different even though the overall shape might be a tree shape, and then if you take a tree as opposed to a flower, or as opposed to a grass ... so I look a lot at nature, a lot.

DUSMAN: I know in *Maim* (Czernowin, 2010), you talked about the architecture of a drop of water, and your desire to capture the essence of that drop of water. You note that eventually this led you to consider other aspects of the movement of water such as a sheet of moving water, thus examining one metaphor from multiple perspectives.

CZERNOWIN: Right. The drops of water, represented as a series of smeared short glissandi, are gradually transformed into individual screams. They become screams, like people screaming in a demonstration. These individual shouts gradually cohere into a unison sonority, just like the individual screams in a demonstration suddenly unite into a collective calling. These then harden into a mechanical 'war drum,' since once they scream together you get a kind of a beat.

DUSMAN: The pulsing.

CZERNOWIN: Pulsing. But then in the second part of *Maim*, the texture becomes a very bare and mechanical, bare bones pulsation: [spoken] *jjt, jjt, jjt*. It's not even a pulsation at that point; it's kind of a militaristic beat.

Interlude 2: There are striking moments in Manoalchadia where elements of these compositional strategies begin to emerge. One can experience the co-evolution of

timbre and time in one beautifully crafted moment in which Czernowin instructs Soprano II to change timbre from 'very nasal' to 'like crying' to 'very breathy' and ultimately to a vocal fry (18–19). At the same time the rhythmic sense evolves from fluid and non-beat driven to quarter note pulsations in 4/4 time: 'bare and mechanical,' yet emotionally saturated. The bass flute solo that opens the piece exhibits a rapid and (by comparison with the vocal parts) rhythmically complex and fractured breathiness that drives the emotional energy of the singers. The first emergence of this mechanized rhythmic feeling appears with Soprano I's statement, shouted, 'Ke-hit-na-pez,' which translates to 'as it explodes ... a raging object ... passing by.' (9). Throughout, Czernowin fragments the two poetic texts, reducing them to syllables that coalesce, creating new linguistic meanings, but at the same time, destroying textual meaning by reducing them to pure sound.

Monoalchadia begins with a clear separation between the members of the trio. The extended bass flute solo descends constantly into extreme and rapid breathiness, brought on by short crescendi that move from a soft to loud dynamic often in less than a second, while the sopranos in a more 'responsorial' way alternate singing the texts. This separation initiates an extended process of braiding the three into one; a first clear moment of this union appears about midway through the work, as the flute and sop.1 arrive on a rhythmic and tonal unison on F#5, followed immediately by a flute/sop. 2 rhythmic and tonal unison on Bb3-A4, and in response a flute/sop.1 rhythmic/tonal unison gesture on G4-A4-F# (p. 14). Significantly, this passage initiates the blending of the 'ah' vowels on the words related to the Hebrew 'touch' (*la-ga-at, no-ga-at, etc.*).

Later in our conversation, we turned to a discussion of Czernowin's view that certain vocalization techniques, such as those heard in *Pnima* (1998–99), can produce sonorities timbrally equal to those of the instrumental ensemble (Figures 2 and 3).

DUSMAN: There is no 'text' for *Pnima* (Czernowin, 2006), is that right?

CZERNOWIN: Right, there is no 'text,' but there *is* text—vocalization. What happens in *Pnima* is that you have two female singers, two male singers, the child, the old man; and you have the instruments. The six double basses belong to the old man's voice, as do the saxophone and trombone. The bass clarinet and the viola are more connected to the child. The percussion is kind of independent, but a lot of the percussion music belongs to the child. There are several sonic complexes at work here.

DUSMAN: So when you think of this voice as the old man, this voice is not only the sound of the two singers. It's all of these instruments as well.

CZERNOWIN: Yes, this is one voice. It's a very complex voice that has all these layers. In a way, for me, *Pnima* represents the cleanest and clearest way in which one would utter emotions. It is really, extremely engaged with emotion and expression. So when the one singer within the complex related to the old man's voice sings 'on te,' and the

The image displays a page of a musical score for the piece 'Manoalchadia', page 14. The score is arranged in three systems, each containing a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line. The vocal parts are labeled 'Sop I', 'FL', and 'Sop II'. The piano part is marked with various dynamics and articulations.

Vocal Lines:

- Sop I:** LA (mp), KE-ZA-VAR (p), BAR-BAR-UR (mp), UR (p), BA-A-VO- (p), -DOT (p), -DZU- (p).
- FL:** (Lyrics are not explicitly written for this part, but it has melodic lines).
- Sop II:** AT NO-GA- (p), AT BIM KOM (p).

Piano Accompaniment:

- Starts with a piano (p) dynamic and includes markings for 'trem. accel.' and 'mf'.
- Features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes.
- Includes dynamic markings such as 'p', 'mp', and 'mf'.
- Articulation marks like '>' and '<' are used throughout.

Figure 3 *Manoalchadia*, p. 14. *Composer Manuscript*: © 1988 by Schott Music, Mainz. Reproduced by permission.

other vocalist of that same complex sings, in counterpoint, ‘mi vu,’ both intertwined in short repeated succession the result is an expression that emanates from the relationship between the two voices: quite hard to the ear, and quite angry.

DUSMAN: To be clear: you created this text for the old man—it is not a pre-existing text in any way.

CZERNOWIN: No. That text is pure music and pure emotion for me. If we move now to the child, you will see that the approach to text is very, very different. When the child comes in, the one voice of the child is singing ‘mi lo,’ and the other voice sings ‘pa li.’ Together they create a kind of a stuttering. It’s a kind of a hesitation. Here the two voices are very similar, ‘twins’ of the same sort, as opposed to the two voices of the old man pushing and pulling against each other, expressing something that would indicate a kind of ambivalence and a kind of hardness.

DUSMAN: Tension.

CZERNOWIN: Tension, exactly. Because if something is pushing and pulling, it will have a lot of power that can also be directed outward. But with respect to the music of the child what we have is something that is softer and feels complete.

DUSMAN: With much softer consonants, and vowels.

CZERNOWIN: Yes, exactly: ‘lo pa pa li a.’ There is nothing hard here. And then ‘L ma’ so a lot of ‘m m l l’ which is like somebody’s only trying to talk.

Interlude 3: Eldan’s Hebrew poetry in the aforementioned Manoalchadia includes many open ‘ah’ vowels, and this phoneme became an important timbral element of Czernowin’s setting. In this early work, there is actual textual meaning: nagua, the utterance that begins the entire work means ‘touched’ or ‘infected.’ Later, maga (‘the touch’), no-ga-at (‘you touch’), la-ga-at (the infinitive ‘to touch’), paga (past tense of ‘hit’), and the poet’s pun with gagua (‘a longing’) all bring this open vowel constantly into the sonic foreground. A culminating passage occurs when the two voices sing no-ga-at and la-ga-at (‘you touch’ / ‘to touch’) as the bass flute returns to the A#-C#5 area from the opening of the work (15–17). The vowel ‘ah’ following from pnima (‘inside’) on a unison line between both singers and the flute constitutes the final cadence, with singers glissandoing upward, al niente.

The result is a kind of primal sensuality, stemming directly from the text’s focus on touch, and the open vowel ‘ah,’ a sonic core of the Hebrew text. These primal vowel sounds are also omnipresent in Czernowin’s opera Pnima ... Inwards, though in that case they are ‘before the word’—they are not derived from a pre-existing text, but instead Czernowin created the text as if ‘someone is trying to talk.’ (Figure 4)

The image shows a handwritten musical score for three vocal parts: Sopranos I and II, and Flute. The score is written on three staves. The lyrics are: "xit AX LA - GA - LA - GA - AT NO - GA - AT NO GA". The score includes various dynamic markings such as *mp*, *pp*, *f*, *mf*, and *p*. Performance instructions include *accel*, *rit. trem.*, *no.b.*, *no. 3*, *no. 1*, *no. 2*, *no. 3*, *no. 4*, *no. 5*, *no. 6*, *no. 7*, *no. 8*, *no. 9*, *no. 10*, *no. 11*, *no. 12*, *no. 13*, *no. 14*, *no. 15*, *no. 16*, *no. 17*, *no. 18*, *no. 19*, *no. 20*, *no. 21*, *no. 22*, *no. 23*, *no. 24*, *no. 25*, *no. 26*, *no. 27*, *no. 28*, *no. 29*, *no. 30*, *no. 31*, *no. 32*, *no. 33*, *no. 34*, *no. 35*, *no. 36*, *no. 37*, *no. 38*, *no. 39*, *no. 40*, *no. 41*, *no. 42*, *no. 43*, *no. 44*, *no. 45*, *no. 46*, *no. 47*, *no. 48*, *no. 49*, *no. 50*, *no. 51*, *no. 52*, *no. 53*, *no. 54*, *no. 55*, *no. 56*, *no. 57*, *no. 58*, *no. 59*, *no. 60*. The score also includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and accents.

Figure 4 *Manoalchadia*, p. 15. *Composer Manuscript*: © 1988 by Schott Music, Mainz. Reproduced by permission.

DUSMAN: Can we move on to a discussion of your opera *Zaïde/Adama* (Czernowin, 2007)?

CZERNOWIN: This brings us back to your question about drama. In *Zaïde/Adama* the drama is built in, because the Mozart is dramatic. The drama in *Zaïde/Adama* then becomes the counterpoint between *Zaïde* and *Adama*, which is a real developing dialogue between the two pieces. For that reason, I have never allowed *Adama* to be performed alone.

With regard to the text, I created a new poem from the Mozart libretto by choosing a few words from each aria and composing them into a poem. I also braided into this poem the Hebrew and Arabic translations of some of the German words. In my setting I often fragment the text and then braid the two languages together: Hebrew for the woman, and Arabic for the man. Many words in *Adama* are taken from the libretto of *Zaïde*, written by Schachtner. These words then embody new meanings. For example, I would point to the section focused on *erde* [German], *land* in English. In Hebrew, the word for *land* is *adama*, and in Arabic it is *ardun*. This is a word that the man and the woman who are in love are slowly repeating, as if they are trying to join the syllables of the Arabic *ardun* and the Hebrew *adama* in a way that both words would match—but they fail. Basically, this is an enactment of their separation. It's actually more complex because in Hebrew *adam* is *man*. *Dam* is *blood*. And *adama* is *land*.

Interlude 4: Czernowin perhaps first explored her unique formal idea of stretching time and timbre through a disproportional 'coda' in Monoalchadia. About midway through the work both singers arrive on B4 with a more closed vowel 'eh,' beginning an extended unison passage for the voices foregrounding timbre (14; see Figure 3). Through constantly shifting dynamics and indications for non-vibrato, meno vibrato, wide-slow vibrato, head tone, nasal, etc. this tonal moment of arrival, which lasts more than a minute, never rests timbrally, while the flute interjects a series of gestures all ending with the marking 'suddenly vanishes.' The voices descend into colored breath: whispers and vocal fry on B4, and in sop. 2 the mechanized rhythms on the text 'i-ix' gradually disappear via bocca chiusa and diminuendo.

This concept of the 'extended coda' is used to great effect in a later piece, Esh (Fire) (2012), (Figure 5).

CZERNOWIN: Whereas a lot of the things I do in the works I have discussed earlier are before the word, let's say, before the word is thought of, or before the word is created, or before the word is active, or before the word is spoken or articulated ... I have also dealt with the notion of the memory of the word, as a kind of backward-looking marker or atmospheric reference, which is in a way the subject of *Esh (Fire)* (2012).

DUSMAN: So here it is ...

CZERNOWIN: ... after the word.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for three parts: Soprano I (Sop I), Flute (FL), and Soprano II (Sop II). The score is written on three systems of staves. At the top left, there is a tempo marking $J=40$. The Soprano I part begins with a dynamic marking of *ppp* and includes the instruction "very breathy". The Flute part has a dynamic marking of *mp* and includes the instruction "suddenly reinitiates". The Soprano II part has a dynamic marking of *pp* and includes the instruction "very breathy". The score is filled with musical notation, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings. There are also some handwritten annotations and symbols, such as "H.T." and "B.C.", scattered throughout the score.

Figure 5 Monoalchadia, p. 19. *Composer Manuscript*: © 1988 by Schott Music, Mainz. Reproduced by permission.

DUSMAN: Do you remember why you made that choice in this piece? Why in this piece is it 'after the word'?

CZERNOWIN: There is a coda in this piece. The whole part after the big crescendo is a huge coda that takes up about half the piece (measure 81 to the end), one that very intentionally got out of control, out of proportion.

It's a piece that deals, really, with this kind of stretching of time. A coda is a place where things are inactive, it is a place where you have arrived, and you are speaking from the place of arrival, or of reference; either referencing it as if it were a memory, or just being in the moment of arrival.

Interlude 5: Our conversation concluded with a more conceptual discussion of the countertenor's arrival in the coda on his first true tone in the work, singing the syllable 'ma.' Czernowin noted this as essentially a metaphor for her concept of 'coda' in Esh (Czernowin, 2013). As such the singer's text/tone constitutes a mnemonic reference, 'a continuous being in place.' She continued:

CZERNOWIN: In *Esh*, I alter the function of the coda, and that's why it can be 'after the word.' But it is kind of a memory, which creates this imbalance in time. The function of the coda is fulfilled, but its duration is stretched far beyond its 'right' proportion. In *Esh* the coda lasts four minutes in a ten-minute piece, and this imbalance is very important. This coda looks *back* at the words, almost like a quotation of some distorted stretched aria.

Interlude 6: Time, timbre, and text become inextricable in Chaya Czernowin's compositional style. It is possible to track their melding from her earliest published compositions to its full expression in her mature works. For her, compositional integrity involves considering the word uttered by the human voice as a world in itself, rich in meanings that exist as a sonic linguistic entity in both psychological and real time, to be created and developed in true parity with all other compositional elements.

Chaya Czernowin's composition *Monoalchadia* © Schott Music, Mainz, Germany. Excerpts reprinted by permission of the publisher.

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