

# The Sound and the Body

## An Essay on the *Œuvre* of Jagoda Szmytka

Monika Pasiecznik

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*In this overview of Jagoda Szmytka's work, Monika Pasiecznik gives the first developed account of the young Polish-born, Germany-based composer: going through various individual pieces, including her opera "for hands and voices", she exposes the various aesthetic and philosophic threads at work in the composer's trajectory, emphasizing her engagement with sound and body.*

### INANE PRATTLE

One of Jagoda Szmytka's most recent compositions bears the title *inane prattle*. The work was written on a commission from the Lucerne Festival, and its world premiere took place in 2013 in Zürich. It is a sophisticated composition, based on a deep knowledge of contemporary instrumental techniques – the result is a music with a clear and distinct sound idiom. Scored for trumpet and amplified ensemble (9 instruments), it also makes use of a recording of an Arab medical doctor talking about skin ailments. The recording is unclear, of poor quality, and gives an impression of the "inane prattle" suggested by the title. In the context of the music it appears, as it were, as a noise that disrupts it, contaminating its smooth surface. Szmytka comments:

To me, to create music does not mean to produce a nice acoustic ornament, a pleasant sound or something sparkly. What is essential is a confrontation with that which is uncomfortable, sometimes painful as a wound.

One may add: also with that which is hidden, unconscious, unwanted, denied. For Jagoda Szmytka, an inseparable element of composition is the reflection on the corporeal and existential dimension of music. In *inane prattle*, the composer points out that unwillingness to compromise and readiness to make sacrifices, usually associated with high-quality art, are also tied to a peculiar sort of exhaustion: the creation of music is demanding both psychologically and physically. The skin is

that which protects, but also reflects the state of the body as a whole. So is Jagoda Szmytka's music her inflamed skin? Hearing the thin, breaking – as it were, "hoarse" – sound of the trumpet in *inane prattle*, the ear could succumb to an association with some sort of exhaustion or enervation. Where the doctor's voice appears, as well, the basses throb like a pulse. The music of *inane prattle* is not, however, a simple illustration of illness, just as the appearance of the doctor's voice is not just "inane prattle". *Inane prattle* is a work in its own way emblematic, typical of Jagoda Szmytka's *œuvre*, in the context of which it takes on a broader, more universal meaning.

### EXPANSION OF THE FIELD OF MUSICALITY

The music of Jagoda Szmytka, born in 1982 in Legnica, Poland, is not just sound material. Aside from a spiritually modernist search for original sound and expansion of sonic means of expression, Jagoda Szmytka draws the listener's attention towards the non-obvious relationships of music with the body; she also touches upon the question of communication and identification. Her compositions are never enclosed in an abstract sound form, but lead one to weighty philosophical content. They are sometimes, beyond this, a critical reflection on the model of Western culture, which is based on the primacy of the eye, and hierarchizes sensory experiences and separates them from intellectual experiences. Jagoda Szmytka's inclination to embroil her music in semantic contexts comes from her very broad artistic and intellectual interests, as well as her versatility.

Already as a teenager, she played the flute, but also painted, created artistic objects, wrote highly original texts. She was interested in art history and theatre. In the traditional educational system, relying upon narrow specialization, she felt in her own way torn – she took the necessity of choosing a discipline which she would want to pursue “seriously” as a sacrifice, a cutting off, a peculiar amputation of something which was without doubt part of her. The problem appeared already during selection of a secondary school: music or visual arts? After that, Jagoda Szmytka did not know what she wanted to study: she started with art history (at the University of Wrocław), then took up studies in music theory (at the Academy of Music in Wrocław), philosophy and, only later, composition. She was not yet convinced then that she wanted to become a composer. These successive stages were to take her into stage directing – she thought that it would rather be in theatre that she would manage to combine all of these interests and not be forced to choose among the visual arts, music, and philosophy. So, for short: word, sound, image, gesture. However, things happened differently and it was music that turned out to be an art sufficiently capacious and multi-dimensional to allow her to develop all of these passions side by side. After completing her degree in Poland, she left to pursue further education first in Austria, then in Germany (with Pierluigi Billone, Beat Furrer and Wolfgang Rihm). Since that time, she has been working very intensively, and reaches now a first blossoming.

Jagoda Szmytka’s musical *œuvre*, thus, has complex aesthetic and intellectual foundations, which is reflected in the diversity of the forms she creates. She composes ensemble concert music (*greetings from a doppelgänger*, 2013; *for travelers like angels or vampires*, 2012; *Oh no, I’ve lost my lofty bow*, 2012; *electrified memories of bloody cherries*, 2011); she also creates sound installations (*handplay in Wunderkammer*, 2012; *just in time*, 2010); performance art works and staged music (*Watch out! of the box*, 2011; *happy deaf people*, 2012; *¿i? study of who where when*, 2008); she composed one chamber opera (*for hands and voices*, 2013).

The mark of Jagoda Szmytka’s individuality is the heterogeneity of her music. She uses modern means of expression; links sound and visual, acoustic and electronic media; arranges various stage actions; introduces texts and objects into her compositions (e.g. the black cubes in the work *Watch out! of the box*, which the performers – a cellist/violinist and a pianist – put together in one place). She does not separate sound from image or touch: everything can become compositional material for her. She conceptualizes music, but does not abandon the development of sonic language or simplify sound. She makes full use of instrumental capabilities: for example, in *inane prattle*, she writes out the wind parts in complex multiphonics and expands the scale using microintervals. She likes a harsh, biting, even somewhat dirty, noise-like sound, which she achieves by subjecting the instruments to strong amplification. She also normally blurs the pitch of the sounds, seeking the intensity and energy contained in them rather than a

precisely defined place in the structure. She draws freely from what modern composition has to offer, processing it and developing it in a creative manner. In Jagoda Szmytka’s music, beyond this, the sound resources used convey specific meanings and form a complex aesthetic space.

## THE INSTRUMENT BODY

An expansion of the field of musicality also means paying attention to marginalized aspects of music, composing, playing and listening. One of the fields conquered (or perhaps recovered?) by Jagoda Szmytka – of utter importance for the development of her musical language as well as the crystallization of her aesthetic language – is the musical instrument itself. The composer treats it neither as an ordinary sound source, nor as a tool in the hands of the musician, but rather as an extension of his/her body, an organ, a sort of extraordinary life form. So the instrument not only has its own anatomy, but also a physiology, which can be “examined”, or even “operated upon”. In Jagoda Szmytka’s *œuvre*, we will find many physiological and medical metaphors. An extreme example of such an approach to the instrument is the composition *Watch out! of the box*, in which Jagoda Szmytka experimented with speakers: she made an incision in the membrane with a scalpel, then sealed it with a bandage and examined how intervention in the “tissue” affects the sound.

An even more typical example of a corporeal approach to the instrument is *körperwelten* (2008), scored for amplified string instrument, audio files and video, which is a peculiar study of performance physiology. Jagoda Szmytka created here an autonomous body language in the form of gestures which she has notated in a special tablature. It is not the sound parameters – so, the combination of pitch, volume and duration – that determine the tone qualities, but the manner in which the performer holds his/her instrument. Since that time, Jagoda Szmytka developed a peculiar *Gestenlehre*, a doctrine of gesture – she has been busy with the isolation and classification of gestures as a sound source. At the same time, gesture in Jagoda Szmytka’s music can be understood both as movement of the body (for example, the hand, but also the lips, in the case of wind instruments), and as a certain sound figure, a motif of a specified shape. The first type of gesture is characteristic of Jagoda Szmytka’s earlier works and is tied to her initial search for her own access to music. The second represents a more mature approach, in which the corporeality of music is realized directly within sound.

## TYPES OF GESTURES

In Jagoda Szmytka’s works, gesture as a bodily action conveys a reflection on that sphere which has been, as it were, driven out of Western music history by the abstraction of the musical idea and its notation. In the process, Szmytka reminds us that

music history can be viewed not only as a succession of styles or a collection of scores, but also as a process of transmission and enrichment of performance techniques, which are nothing but practiced movements of hands and feet, determination of the position of the lips with respect to a reed, etc. Music, viewed in this way, is a particular “body memory”.

In Jagoda Szmytka’s early works, the fact that gesture is understood in bodily terms becomes an all-important quality: it is both sound source and musical material. The sound of *körperwelten* is a derivative of the manner in which the musician makes use of the instrument: how she/he holds the violin, with what kind of motion she/he stimulates the instrument to make it resonate. In the ensemble composition *verb(a)renne Life!* (2009), what is significant is how the musician arranges his/her lips with respect to the reed of a wind instrument, as well as the manner in which he/she applies his/her hand to the megaphone, in this way triggering feedback. This bodily stamp is realized in yet another way in *¿i? study of who where when* (2008). In this work, the point is to lay the forearm on the piano keyboard as naturally as possible. Because it is not as straight as a ruler, some notes will be heard more clearly, some less so. In this manner, the music takes on a literally bodily shape, and its sound results directly from the activity of the body.

These compositions, as it were, prepared the ground for a more subtle, abstract perspective on gesture, as well as on corporeality itself, in Jagoda Szmytka’s more recent works, such as *inane prattle, greetings from a doppelgänger, f\* for music* for electric guitar and cello (2012) and the chamber opera *for hands and voices* (2013). In those works, the bodily gesture is transformed into a sound gesture – a figure of determinate contour which is isolated during the musical process and has a certain autonomy. The gestural character of these figures consists in their representing a certain distinct shape or movement, rather than a concrete acoustic quality. Our attention is drawn by such types of sound shape-gestures as the point, the line, the zigzag and the meander. Corresponding to them are the repetition on one pitch or the *tremolo*, the *glissando*, multiple *glissandi* ascending and descending in alternation, and the melodic line (in *inane prattle*). In these works, Jagoda Szmytka simplified the notation, leaving only selected tablature elements, notating such directions of motion (e.g. of the bow) directly as “circular motion”, “loop”, “figure eight”, “zigzag”.

Thus Jagoda Szmytka is melting gestures more and more into sounds. The composer is aware of this and views this process as that of her own development. She explains it in terms of the need to grapple with the very relationship between body and music, or with a certain tension between the body and language. She has been seeking something which would allow her to define her own viewpoint, her own feeling for what sound is, what musicality is, what it means to create music, to live in music. She departed from that which appeared to her elementary, simple, basic, to systematically enrich her repertoire of resources, develop her sound language and uncover more and more new meanings.

## THE TRUTH OF NOISE

In 2013, on a commission from the Teatr Wielki – the Polish National Opera –, Jagoda Szmytka composed the opera *for hands and voices*, which alluded in an even more complex manner to the corporeality of music, as well as to the medical metaphor, creating a peculiar sort of “anatomy lesson”.

It is a highly amusing comedy based on a “theatre within theatre” motif. The audience becomes acquainted with the process of the birth of an opera from the moment of the composer’s presentation of the project to the director of the theatre, through all the stages and various obstacles in its realisation (the search for a stolen piano, the work with performers with a sceptical attitude towards the score, etc), up to the dress rehearsal featuring a careless soloist. The opera, thus, documents the process of the work on this very opera: the libretto is woven from dialogues overheard at the theatre; appearing on stage are not only the members of the choir, stylized as administrative workers, but also an *alter ego* of Szmytka herself (the superb actress and violinist Barbara Wysocka), as well as the stage director and co-creator of the libretto, Michał Zadara.

If we define anatomy as “the artificial separation of the different parts of a human body or animal (or more generally of any organized body), in order to discover their position, structure, and economy” (quoting the OED), then Jagoda Szmytka’s opera portrays the anatomy of an institution, dividing this particular “body” to study its constituent parts. *for hands and voices* is a vivisection, or an operation, as well as a diagnosis indicating illnesses of the most serious type, which also means an analytical view of art itself and its means of production. Jagoda Szmytka composed her instrumental score for a large chamber ensemble (12 instruments), making the musicians stage protagonists. Placing in the mouth of the composer the words that “there are no pretty or ugly sounds. There are no true or false sounds. All producible sounds belong to a given instrument”, Szmytka emphasized that noise, interference and flaws build the “body” and give meaning to (a) modern composition.

Stage director and co-author of the libretto Michał Zadara has gone yet further and argued, in his booklet note for the opera, that “thanks to noise, theatre can become a place of truth”. On stage, thus, vivisection means the revelation of an insight into the work in a theatre, as well as the chaos of preparations for a premiere. Where the audience was expecting a “Work”, what appeared were machinists, electricians, technical workers and the theatre administration, engaged in a shouting match with the artists. As Michał Zadara puts it:

A work is always divided in half: there is the visible side, containing the message intended by the creators of the work; and the dark side of the work, containing the truth about the conditions of its birth, presentation and reception. In the theatre, the actors walk on the bright side; the machinists, on the dark side.



Jagoda Szmytka preparing the performance of "electrified memories of bloody cherries" in Cracow, 2011. Photo: Jagoda Szmytka

In Zadara's opinion, contemporary humanity does not like to think about how something is made:

The contemporary economy also produces a peculiar innocence. Each product has an aura of innocence, because it does not contain a record of the events which led to its making. The global production system is a great staging of innocence, masking a monstrous massacre of nature, animals and people.

In this manner, the anatomy in Jagoda Szmytka's opera has also taken on a socio-political dimension that is new to her.

## VIRTUAL PRESENCE

Jagoda Szmytka's music has recently been drawing from larger and larger semantic circles, absorbing new subjects or finding a new perspective on old ones. These result from experience – for instance, the daily situation of a composer living in Germany who contacts her friends in Poland mainly via Skype or Facebook. The thread of virtual communication – full of interference, noise and misunderstandings – appeared already

in the work *skype-me type-me* (2011) for four megaphone-amplified voices. In turn, in the work *greetings from a doppelgänger*, the live performance of the musicians is confronted with a virtual double (i.e. one played from speakers). From yet another angle, the subject of real and virtual presence is taken up again by the stage work *happy deaf people*, in which a female cellist tells the audience about the instrument's pleasant vibrations. The sounds are translated into, among other things, sign language and images, and the title's "happiness" of deaf people consists in the ability to conceive sound in a corporeal and, at the same time, intellectual manner, which would be difficult for people with the ability to hear. For the miracle of corporeal experience of sound and, thereby, a special feeling of community to happen at all, one must go to the concert, be there with one's body, and not only listen to the music at home with earphones.