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Jelena Janković

'LET ME TELL THE STORY FROM THE BEGINNING'

About the stage cantata *Atlas* by Anja Đorđević

Abstract: Using the book *Weight: the Myth of Atlas and Heracles* by Jeanette Winterson, the composer Anja Đorđević composed the stage cantata *Atlas* for voice, narrator and chamber orchestra, which had its opening night on 28th June 2008 at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre. *Atlas*, the universal symbol of suffering, isolation, craving to overcome one's own fate, becomes the *alter-ego* of the writer Winterson, but of Anja Đorđević too, who 'tells the story from the beginning' by her own expressive means – by writing music, but appearing on the stage as a performer as well.

Key words: *Atlas*, weight, story-telling, self-reflection, melody

Can it be a coincidence that the new musical-stage accomplishment by Anja Đorđević, the cantata *Atlas* for voice, narrator and chamber orchestra, had its opening night on the day of the composer's birthday – 28 June 2008 at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre?¹ Or did the all-seeing eye of fate intervene, continually changing the date planned for the opening night, so as to make the paths of *Atlas* and Đorđević cross that evening? Whatever the reason, Đorđević once again confirmed her composing and performing gift, which can be described in one word – unique, at least within the scope of our artistic scene.² I once wrote that her means of expression is stage, both in composing and the moments of more direct communication

¹ Music: Anja Đorđević; song texts: Minja Bogavac, Maja Pelević, Perica Perišić, Marija Stojanović; the libretto synthesis: Bojana Denić.

First performance: Anja Đorđević, voice; Perica Perišić, narrator (from the tape); Aleksandar Denić, staging; Bojana Denić, scenical motion and performer; Marija Jelesijević, costume; Premil Petrović, conductor; instrumental ansamble (Ivan Ranković, clarinet and bass clarinet; Sava Djirić, bassoon; Milan Rokсандić, horn; Sonja Lončar, piano; Ivan Marjanović, percussion; Petar Živanović, violin; Miloš Petrović, violine; Boris Brezovac, viol; Dejan Božić, cello; Ivan Maksimović, double bass.

Production: Jugokonzert and Yugoslav Drama Theatre.

² Anja Đorđević (1970) is a graduate of the Faculty of Music Art in Belgrade, Department of Composition and Orchestration, belonging to the class of Prof. Vlastimir Trajković. Her works primarily focus on vocal music and music theatre: *Three Songs* for Solo Voice; *Enemy Time*, *Total Reflection* u *Niagara* (from the multimedia number *Tesla – Total Reflection*); the multimedia number *Classifieds*; musical *the Life of Jevrem*; opera *Narcissus & Echo* etc. She composed music for various theatrical plays, such as *Waiting for Godot*, *Dog Waltz*, *Eve of Retirement* (JDT); *Everyman*, *Can't escape Sunday* (Atelje 212); *Indifference* (Spoleto, Italy – cooperation with La MaMa Umbria International). She is also the music author for several plays incorporating contemporary dance: *Lift* (Bitef Theatre), *Snow Queen* (Children's Theatre Duško Radović), *Selferase* (Belef 2006). She composed the music for the documentary films *Alone by Chance* (directed by Goran Radovanović) and *Djindjic – Ein Leben* (directed by Christoph Sodemann), for exhibitions, installations and short audio-visual forms, etc. Her compositions have been performed at the most significant festivals in the country (Bemus, Bitef, Belef, Ring Ring, Jazz and Improvised Music in Kanjiža, International panel of Composers, EXIT, Interzone Novi Sad).

She has been a performer since 1994, at first within the project *Music Synthesis*, and then as a member of the groups *Marsija* and *Ravno nebo*, and a soloist in her own vocal works.

She received the *Stevan Mokranjac* award in 2002.

with the audience – when she performs her music by herself, live. In the stage cantata *Atlas*, Anja Djordjević weights herself again with the twofold burden – that of the author and performer alike – and presents it with dignity and ease, in her own inimitable way.

Why Atlas of all others?

The inspiration for the birth of the cantata was the book *Weight: the Myth of Atlas and Heracles* by the British novelist Jeanette Winterson,³ in which Winterson retells the well-known ancient myth in a completely new way – *story told anew*. Winterson perceives Atlas as the universal symbol of human suffering, applicable to all times and areas – including now and here. '*Atlas, Atlas, Atlas*. It is written in my name, I could have known. My name is Atlas – it means "one who's been suffering for a long time".'⁴ While there are many narrative versions of the myth of Atlas, in which the plot details differ considerably, they all have the same essence, as they speak of human loneliness and isolation as two of the most severe punishments. While preserving the central motive of the plot (Atlas has been punished for rebelling against Olympus, and must bear the world forever; Heracles pleads with Atlas to pick the golden apples of Hesperides for him, briefly takes up the weight from Atlas, and then fraudulently gives it back to him), the novelist reshaped the narrative aspect of the myth and gave the ancient story a contemporary moral.

Weight is a novel not only about Atlas, but about Jeanette Winterson herself: the author identifies with the title hero and therefore narrates in the first person, and her hard life story (she has never met her biological parents and was rejected by her foster parent) represents the contemporary manifestation of Atlas's punishment.⁵ By revealing her own vulnerability without shame or self-pity, Winterson in her narration/confession obliterates the boundaries between reality and fiction, past and present, myth and autobiography.

The issue of freedom and opposition to predetermined fate, given to the man by some higher force, features prominently in this book – as does the issue of superseding one's own boundaries.⁶ Searching for answers, Winterson provides a different epilogue to the story of Atlas: just as the golden

³ Jeanette Winterson, *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles*, Translated from English by: Mirna Radin-Sabadoš, Beograd, Geopoetika, 2005.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵ 'I know nothing about my biological parents. They live on the lost DNA continent DNK. Like Atlantis, all their traces have been sent to [the] bottom. They belong to speculation, anticipations, mythology.' *Ibid.*, 91-92. The novelist fuses various myths pertaining to the character of Atlas – in addition to the myth of Atlas and Heracles, she attributes to Atlas the characteristics of her father, Iapetus the Titan (the son of Gaea – the Earth, and Uranus – the Sky), but also of the other Atlas, the master of Atlantis, the son of Poseidon and a mortal mother. Atlantis, the lost island on the west of the ancient world, where the garden of the golden apples might have been located, and which was guarded by one of the Atlas's daughters Hesperides (according to the other version, the garden was located in Libya, near mount Atlas), is the epitome of the lost origin for Jeanette Winterson.

⁶ 'Because I am strong, my punishment was to support the Universe on my shoulders. I took up the burden of the whole world, the heavens above it, and the depths below. Everything that exists is mine, but none of it is under my control. This is my monstrous burden. The boundary of what I am. And my desire? *Infinite space*.' *Ibid.*, 28.

apples which Atlas picks for Heracles represent many potential futures from which the man may choose, the author has chosen for Atlas – and herself – a happy ending.

Recognising Atlas in herself, the author could not speak about him in a documentary fashion, through the eye of the inquisitive person (voyeur), but felt compelled to speak about him from the opposite view – *from within*. Winterson observes that ‘Right now, human beings, as the multitude, are ... panicky afraid of the inner life, of the sublime, poetic, immaterial, reflective. In spite of all that, a writer like me, someone who believes in narration because of its mythical rather than explicative qualities ... must row against the current’.⁷ It was these qualities of Jeanette Winterson’s prose that caught the eye of Anja Djordjević, the composer who also creates ‘from imagination’ and who is similarly attracted to mythological subjects, because they make room for self-reflection. After the opera *Narcissus & Echo*, in which love was the central emotional motif (love for yourself, love for others, unrequited love), in *Atlas*, Anja Djordjević confronted a new and difficult subject, and tried to deal with it in the language of her own sensitivity. To that end, she received help from four poets who also recognised bits of Atlas in themselves and wrote new stories on the same subject – in the first person, from their own points of view, just like Jeanette Winterson did.⁸ In that way, the story of Atlas and the burden he bears, in the cantata by Anja Djordjević, which bears the same name, has been told from a great variety of perspectives; it is multi-layered and rich in meaning, as every narrator, from ancient times to Anja and her poets, has left on it a mark of his own being.⁹

***Atlas* by Anja Djordjević**

A dramaturgical overview of the narrative and poetic text in the cantata *Atlas* shows that the framework of the myth of Atlas and Heracles has been kept, but the narration is a series of ‘flashbacks’ to important moments from the life of Atlas: his birth and his parents’ inheritance, rebellion against the gods, acceptance of punishment, the moment of relief and recurred taking up of the burden, yearning for freedom, resignation to fate and, finally, unanticipated but desired freedom.¹⁰ Structurally, the narrative of the myth can be illustrated in the following manner:

⁷ Ibid., 16-17.

⁸ Anja Djordjević selected the poems, and Bojana Denić merged them into libretto, having linked them with quotations from the novel *Weight*.

⁹ This is how the process of the collaborative effort on the cantata *Atlas* was described by the poet (and the drama writer) Milena-Minja Bogavac: ‘Anja, who gave us to read the booklet as an assignment, varied the motives which I have been obsessively dealing with in my writing in the recent years. The composer Anja Djordjević could not have known that when she asked me, of all drama writers and poets available in this city (...) We spoke about Atlas, in Anja’s room packed with old maps... we talked about the burden and the worlds we bear, and it seemed to me, after every meeting of ours, that the world I bore on my shoulders was getting lighter.’ See: *Atlas’s time out*, <http://blog.b92.net/text/3314/ATLASOV%20TIME%20OUT/>

¹⁰ Although Heracles is the second central character of the novel *Weight*, it is him who asks the essential question *Why?* (why do we accept our fate and bear the burden), in Anja Djordjević’s cantata he is only implicitly present.

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TABLE 1

Narrative parts	Musical numbers	Myth of Atlas
No. 1. THE PROLOGUE (narrator)		Universe – the scene plot
	PRELUDE – WALTZ-ODE to the Earth thirsty for life (instrumental) 'Rich and at ease how life can be' (112)	- /// -
No. 2. THE BANG OF THE SUPERNOVA (narrator)		Atlas gets ready to tell the story about his weight, he has plenty of time
	CIRCLE (voice and ensemble; verses: M. Bogavac) 'Swinging delight' (116)	- /// -
No. 3 MOTHER EARTH, FATHER WATER (narrator)		The birth of Atlas
	MIRROR (voice and ensemble; verses: M. Pelević) 'Through a very thick fog' (80) – 'In presence of a guardian angel' (60)	- // -
No. 4 INERTIA (narrator)		- /// -
	TO FULFIL... (voice and ensemble; verses: P. Perišić) 'Make a statement' (112)	- /// -
No. 5 GENES (narrator)		- /// -
	TO FULFIL... (voice and ensemble; verses: P. Perišić)	- /// -
No. 6 MATURATION (narrator)		Rebellion
	EXPEDITION (voice and ensemble without the brass) 'Felicitous fellowship with joy' (80)	- /// -
No. 7 OBSTACLE (narrator)		Defeat
	AFTER SUMMER (voice and piano; verses: M. Bogavac) 'Sigh' (66)	- /// -
	SHARK (voice and ensemble without the winds; verses: M. Stojanović) 'Lightly, cheerfully (almost whistling)' (120)	Punishment – resignation to fate
No. 8 PUNISHMENT (narrator)		- /// -
	IN THOUGHTS (voice and piano; verses: M. Bogavac) 'Alert, hunting angst' (90) – 'Shivering'	- /// -
	PLEASE, HOLD THE WORLD FOR ME (voice and ensemble – only piano and the strings; verses: M. Bogavac) 'Deep sigh' (66)	- /// Atlas's burden can not be borne by anyone else, the punishment was set to fit him
No. 9 DOOM		- /// -

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(narrator)		
	GIVE THE WORLD BACK TO ME (voice and ensemble – only the piano and the strings ; verses: M. Bogavac) 'Pleading sigh' (66)	- /// -
No. 10 SUFFERING (narrator)		- /// -
	EVIAN SPRAY (voice and piano; verses: M. Stojanović) 'Like a soft summer breeze' (63)	Yearning for freedom
	EXPEDITION 2 (voice and piano; verses: M. Bogavac) 'Would be nice to give it a smile' (80) – 'Rising euphoria'	Rebellion
	LET ME GO, LET ME GO (voice and piano; verses: M. Pelević) 'When you release the bird' (63) – 'In presence of a guardian angel'	The rebirth of Atlas
No. 11 WOOF! (narrator)		Liberation, overcoming of fate
	LET ME GO, LET ME GO (instrumental)	- /// -

Following the myth's latent dramaturgy, Anja Đorđević composed the numbers with varying moods, in which she 'retold the story from the beginning' through musical means. Unusual performance indications for pieces and particular sections, which replace the usual tempo markings, can be taken as instructions to performers for their interpretation of the emotional contents of the songs.¹¹ Through the contrasting characters of the musical numbers, the tension alternately rises and falls, and by transferring specific musical (also musical-textual) entities, the composer achieves greater unity. Among those entities, the most important is section **B** from the number *Mirror* (Example 1), the text and music of which recurs at the very end of the cantata (*Let me go* and *Let me go* – instrumentally). This motif can be taken as the moment of the 'birth' of Atlas, so that his appearance at the end of the cantata, when he finally frees himself from his burden, is perceived as some kind of 'rebirth', the new existence unencumbered by earlier worries. The numbers *Expedition* and *Expedition 2* represent Atlas's rebellion – in the former case, the uprising against Olympus, and in the latter, the opposition to his punishment, his rebellion against the inevitability of fate. The songs *After Summer*, *Please, Hold the World for Me* and *Give the World Back to Me* contain Atlas's suffering in a stark manner (with the reduced accompaniment of the piano only, or the piano and the strings). Simultaneously, these songs surround the communicational core of the cantata, comprised of the songs *Shark* and *In Thoughts*.

Apart from the transition of the musical materials, the composer also achieves coherence by the application of the related shape-forming and harmonic solutions in all vocal-instrumental numbers. It is about simple forms, based on the varied repetition of short sections, constituting a small number of musical motives. Even fairly large numbers (e.g., *Shark*, *Evian Spray*) are shaped in this manner, a procedure Anja Đorđević often uses in her compositions. The harmonic language is extensively tonal,

¹¹ Table 1 – the character marks are provided as the text under quotations; metronomic marks are given in brackets.

and a special feature is the use of modes in specific pieces or sections, especially Lydian (in the Prelude and the *Expeditions*) and Dorian (*In Thoughts, Evian Spray*).

Just as Jeanette Winterson identifies with *Atlas* with her 'female script' (small, personal, specific, emotional), Đorđević associates the female voice/performer with *Atlas*. Therein lies the greatest quality of the cantata – the vocal melody. It is based on the tuneful musical phrases of a small ambitus, speech-like, but subjected to their own rules rather than the structure of the sung text. Anja Đorđević strives to attain an ever more natural relationship between the words and melody: the virtuosity of her procedure leads the listener to believe that the text and music have originated from 'the same source', that the words and melody emerge at the same time rather than it being a previously written text which has become 'musicalized'. The close cooperation that the composer achieves with poets Minja Bogavac, Maja Pelević and Perica Perišić makes this quality of vocal expression possible. In their poetry, Anja Đorđević recognizes herself and begins speaking *from within, telling the story* with her own means of expression (first and foremost music writing, but also performing, with her voice and body).

In *Atlas*, Đorđević's 'pop' sensibility finds expression, by which I mean her 'singer-songwriter' ability to compress emotions in the form of a three-minute smash hit. The instrumental ensemble, consisting of ten members (brilliant on the opening night under the safe hand of the conductor Premil Petrović), follows, controls, partakes, encourages, dazes, adds colour and volume to the story. Đorđević's compositional style achieves a new level of maturity and uniqueness: by giving up the allusions to musical folklore or the lyrics of previous stages, which gave a touch of recognition to her previous compositions, she lets her original melodic gift show to the full extent.

Atlas's garden

'I have built an enclosed garden, *tetenos*, a shrine. I have lifted enormous rocks with my hands and stacked them carefully. . . . That garden is far known. My daughters, Hesperides, take care of it, and it is called the Garden of Hesperides all over the world. Among other common plants, there thrives a rare fruit. My mother, Mother Earth, presented the goddess Hera with the golden apple tree the day of her wedding and Hera grew fond of it so much that she asked me to keep it for her and look after it.'¹²

In spite of the scene-like quality of the music, and the appearance and voice of Anja Đorđević, one should not presume that the staging of *Atlas* was a simple task. Given the meaningful and multi-layered complexity of this work, director Aleksandar Denić selected specific elements from that semantic abundance, on the basis of which he told his own version of the story of *Atlas*. Mr. Denić shaped the scene plot over the four symbols: the apple, the dog (Laika), the eye and the Earth. From them he built 'the new *Atlas's* garden', placing it in a near, but imaginary, time and place. What is the significance of

¹² J. Winterson, op. cit., 26.

these symbols in relation to the ancient myth of Atlas, Jeanette Winterson's book and Ana Djordjević's cantata?

The apple, the forbidden fruit, as in the story of Adam and Eve, gives people divine knowledge about the world: it is a symbol of the desire to overcome the limits of your own existence. Aleksandar Denić gave an assignment to the performer - the hero's alter ego on stage - to embroider the apple on canvas with a ball of red wool, which is, in another myth, the symbol of fate. That way the play of determinism and indeterminism in life is painted, the man's confrontation with his own limits, and his attempt to overcome them. When Atlas goes to pick apples for Heracles from the garden of Hesperides, many possible worlds begin to be revealed to him, possible pasts and futures, but also the basic existential non-freedom that stems from the fact that the man must choose his own future, to bear the consequences of his decisions.¹³ The repercussions of Atlas's rebellion against the gods included loss of the garden and freedom; this is why Atlas keeps thinking about the creation of another garden, because it gives him a sense of freedom. In the cantata *Atlas*, yearning for freedom is the subject of the song *Evian Spray*, and in Aleksandar Denić's *mise en scène*, that scene is visually solved as the garden of neon lights 'in full bloom'.

The symbol of the all-seeing eye can be related to Zeus, the master of Olympus, who observes Atlas's disobedience when he temporarily gives his burden to Heracles and leaves to pick apples. The colossal eye at the bottom of the stage, which gradually reveals itself during the performance (Aleksandar Denić's sculpture *the Eye of the East*), instead of an iris has the planet Earth at its centre, as the symbol of Atlas's weight.¹⁴ Eventually, Atlas decides to change his fate, to drop the weight – but, what impulse affected the change of the pre-determined outcome? That force is Laika, the small dog launched into space, *Deus ex machina* (literally!), which gives Atlas the much needed perception that he's *still* not alone. There disappears the weight of the loneliness and isolation: 'Atlas raised his head, turned, rose, and stepped backwards. The dog raised its nose. Atlas looked back on his burden. There was not any. There was just the Earth, blue as a diamond, a tended garden in the wilderness of space.'¹⁵

It is worth mentioning that Aleksandar Denić's inscenation is, to a great extent, reliant on the performing charisma of Anja Djordjević, the composer who sings, acts, dances and unobtrusively communicates with other performers. That is why it is difficult to talk about the cantata *Atlas* without taking into consideration the all-inclusiveness of Anja Djordjević's music-scene talent. It would certainly

¹³ "“You have chosen three apples. Have you chosen deliberately or at random?” “When I looked at the tree, there were only three apples on it.” “Atlas was confused. He saw the tree sagging under the weight of the fruit, just like now, but as he was picking apples, there seemed to be only three of them, the three he had to choose.” “There is no miracle, Atlas. You could not see the tree the way it was. You could not see the mutability of the world. All these pasts are yours, all the futures, all the presents. You could have chosen differently. You haven't.” Ibid., 59-60.

¹⁴ Although it is commonly held that Atlas's burden is the universe rather than the Earth, in Jeanette Winterson's book the burden includes all - moreover, Atlas himself has merged with the burden he bears.

¹⁵ Ibid., 97.

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be interesting, of course, to hear and see this scene cantata in other interpretations, since *Atlas* certainly deserves it, thanks to its originality.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović

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Example 1

The image displays a musical score for a vocal and instrumental ensemble. It is divided into three systems, each starting with a double bar line and a repeat sign. The first system is titled "Clearing" with a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 63$. It features a vocal line (Voc) and three instrumental lines: Clarinet (Cl), Fagott (Fg), and Violin I (Vn I). The vocal line includes the lyrics: "Pu - sti me, pu - sti Te - ško - je te - lo, a pu - sti,". The instrumental parts include dynamic markings such as *mp*, *mf*, and *mp*, and performance instructions like *armonioso*. The second system begins at measure 32 and continues the vocal line with lyrics: "pu - sti... Pu - sti me, pu - sti ne di-ram te pu - sti. Te - lo - što se". The third system begins at measure 59 and is titled "In presence of a guardian angel" with a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 63$. The vocal line includes the lyrics: "ra - dja, a pu - sti...". The instrumental parts continue with dynamic markings like *p* and *mp*.

САЖЕТАК

Јелена Јанковић

“ЖЕЛИМ ДА ИЗНОВА ИСПРИЧАМ ПРИЧУ” О сценској кантати *Атлас* Ање Ђорђевић

Користећи као полазиште књигу *Терет – Мит о Атласу и Хераклу* Џенет Винтерсон, композиторка Ања Ђорђевић компоновала је сценску кантату *Атлас* за глас, наратора и камерни оркестар, која је премијерно изведена 28. јуна 2008. у Југословенском драмском позоришту. Атлас, универзални симбол патње, изолације, жудње за превазилажењем сопствене судбине, постаје *alter-ego* књижевнице Винтерсон, која се с њиме поистовећује и прича причу о сопственом животу. Њена прича има срећан крај – могуће је изменити судбину. Подстакнути њеном интерпретацијом мита, Ања Ђорђевић и њени сарадници (песници и редитељ), причају своје приче, свако својим језиком. Резултат је комплексан. Свака сличност са Вама је намерна.