

Comment c'est by Michael Mantler

Comment c'est (How it is) is a song cycle for female voice and chamber orchestra. Wanting to use French, a language that so beautifully lends itself to be sung, I had long been thinking of using a certain type of voice from French popular music in a totally different and serious context. When the project finally came to be realized I luckily found a very interesting French electro-pop/jazz singer, Himiko Paganotti.

She turned out to be the perfect choice, having a tremendous range, both musically and emotionally. Introduced to me by John Greaves, an old cohort of mine, she had worked with him and in many different contexts, including the French cult rock-jazz band *Magma*. Our first occasion to work together was at a concert in Paris during 2014 with the *Chaos Orchestra* of composers Daniel Yvinec and Arnaud Petit. This collaboration resulted in a lengthy work entitled *Oiseaux de Guerre (Birds of War)*, which dealt with atrocities of the Iraq war. Continuing from there, wanting to explore the voice and the general theme further, I worked on creating *Comment c'est*.

I have always kept my musical life as abstract as possible, never directly related to programmatic influences or themes, such as world politics, news items or personal life events. In hindsight, that was only partially successful. After all, I participated in the early *Liberation Music Orchestra* projects with Charlie Haden. For me, however, it was more the musical experience that counted, rather than the expression of political views. Of course, at the time, one marched on Washington, demonstrated against Vietnam and, in general, behaved anti-government, anti-business and anti-establishment.

Certain critical political-sociological world-views eventually began to appear from time to time in my work, such as in *Cerco Un Paese Innocente* (*I search for an innocent land* - another song cycle, this one in Italian), and especially in the extended sort-of-an-opera *The School of Understanding*, with some of its songs resurfacing, extensively revised, in this current project.

No longer able to ignore outrageous recent world events, it had simply become impossible to continue creating music without reacting to this overwhelming and pervasive environment of hatred, greed and corruption. *Comment c'est* therefore concerns itself quite specifically with a range of serious subjects, such as war, terrorism, hostages, migration, poverty, fear and the generally sorry state of our contemporary world.

I have always wanted to simply create music that is beautiful and that perhaps reveals something that might be deep within us all. Yet, with this music, in particular, I hope not only to touch those elusive feelings but also to more concretely tell *How It Is*.

Himiko Paganotti is being supported by the *MAX BRAND Ensemble*, under the direction of Christoph Cech, who recently had also conducted the recording and performances of my *Jazz Composer's Orchestra Update* project. The ensemble consists of flute, oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, French horn, tuba, string quintet, vibraphone/marimba, plus the pianist David Helbock and myself on trumpet as additional soloists.

Its live premiere took place with two concerts at *Porgy & Bess* in Vienna during September 2016. A studio recording of the work was released by ECM Records during November 2017.