

"Comment c'est" by Michael Mantler

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"*Comment c'est*" 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 been thinking, already years ago, of using a certain type of voice from French popular music in a totally different and serious context. That included, at the time, even attempting (and failing) to interest Patricia Kaas, but when the project finally came to be realized I luckily found a very interesting and wonderful French electro-pop/jazz singer, Himiko Paganotti.

Although not being the "typical" French pop voice I had originally envisaged, 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, among others, the French cult rock-jazz band Magma. Our first occasion to work together was at a concert in Paris during 2014 with the short-lived Chaos Orchestra of composers Daniel Yvinec (Orchestre National de Jazz) and Arnaud Petit, resulting 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*."

Throughout my career I have always wanted to keep 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, in fact, only partially successful. After all, I participated in the early *Liberation Music Orchestra* projects with Charlie Haden, even though for me it was indeed more the musical experience that counted, rather than the expression of political views through that platform (nevertheless, at the time one of course 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 in fact resurfacing, extensively revised, in this current project. No longer able to ignore the overwhelming and outrageous recent world events, it had simply become impossible to continue blissfully creating music abstractly without reacting to the all-pervading environment of hatred, greed and corruption. "*Comment c'est*" therefore indeed refers specifically and reacts strongly to recent events and concerns itself with a range of deadly serious subjects, such as war, terrorism, hostages, migration, poverty, fear and the exceedingly sorry state of the world in general. My music has often been considered ("accused" even ...) of being melancholy, depressing and difficult. Perhaps it has always been an unconscious reaction to life as we know it, yet to me, this supposedly sad quality of the music had never been the specific intention, my *raison d'être* has always been to simply create music that is beautiful and perhaps express something that might be deep within us all. Yet, with this latest project, should one finally really post "enter at your own risk" signs?

Himiko Paganotti is being supported by the MAX BRAND Ensemble, conducted by 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.