

***Mente* and Expressive Possibilities of Morphing in Contemporary Melodrama**

Vít Zouhar

“Everything we do is done by invitation.” With these words John Cage commenced his speech upon receiving the Karl Sczuka Prize in Donaueschingen on 20 October 1979 for *Roaratorio*, the composition in which using the form of mesostics he transfigured the text of James Joyce’s novel *Finnegans Wake*, accompanied by the sounds mentioned in this text and the “*Irish Circus*”, as he himself termed the sounds of traditional Irish music that localise the composition in sonic terms. This text of mine too, as well as my composition *Mente* (2008), which it refers to, would not exist if it were not for an invitation: thanks to Andreas Rochhol in 2008 and today thanks to Jiří Kopecký. Nevertheless, the key roles an invitation plays are followed by decisive processes. In the case of *Mente*, it was the multivalence between the poetry and music, from concurrences to morphing, when music changes into text and text into music.

Although John Cage’s compositions, such as the aforementioned *Roaratorio* (1979) or *Indeterminacy* (1958), and Steve Reich’s pieces *It’s Gonna Rain* (1965), *Come Out* (1966) or *Different Trains* (1988) are not usually associated with melodrama, works with text and music represent a specific continuation of this type. A dramatic or lyrical text and the onomatopoeia in it have been replaced by non-narrativity, indeterminacy, as well as loops and *difference*, yet the text remains the base forming the musical structure and the spoken word the parameter determining and characterising the entire composition. If I want to talk about the conceptual and technological possibilities of the melodrama in relation to morphing between the text and music, their aesthetic and historic distance notwithstanding, the above-mentioned compositions are key reference points. From them we will then create relations to the composition *Mente*.

Projection, not morphing

When accepting the Karl Sczuka Prize, John Cage added: “That invitation comes from oneself or from another person.”¹ Accordingly, the invitation to give a thank-you speech became a vehicle for balancing a number of invitations, both inner and outer, whose fruit was the composition *Roaratorio*. In this *Hörspiel*, as he himself designates the composition, John Cage is not only the author but also a reader, similarly to the case of his previous compositions, including *Indeterminacy* of twenty years earlier. And similarly to this composition, the non-concurrence of the text and sounds is a determinant in *Roaratorio* too. However, whereas in *Indeterminacy* the interactions between Cage’s text and sounds by David Tudor are totally undetermined and uncorrelated in advance, in the case of *Roaratorio* sounds draw upon the original Joyce text, yet their number and placement are not determined by it. Accordingly, sounds draw upon the text but neither directly react to it nor illustrate it. Merely the “*Irish Circus*” forms a sort of general sonic framework, the soundscape, locally determining the whole text. The linkage between the text and sound thus changes from signification to difference. The meaning originates between the signifiers and the sound, while the sonic quality itself (not the category) is in this case rather a matter of indifference to the author. What is pivotal, though, is the interaction itself, everything that originates between the texts, not within them. The text and sound do not transform each other but create their own parallel stories, in this case not morphing but projection.

Morphing and speech melody

Just as Cage’s *Indeterminacy* and *Roaratorio* have indeterminacy and concurrency in common, so Steve Reich’s compositions *It’s Gonna Rain*, *Come Out* and *Different Trains* are similarly connected by the speech melody principle. In these compositions too, the text, or spoken word, is the base. The melodic-rhythmic outline of speech is as determinant here as the meaning: in this case, however, not of the author himself but of real characters. As a sonic documentarist,² Reich works with recordings of statements of a Pentecostal preacher, a participant in a Harlem riot, a Pullman porter and Holocaust survivors so as to create musical compositions from them.³ Through complicated operations the musical structure originates from the spoken text. Similarly to Leoš Janáček, for whom a speech melody is both the bearer of expression and (through transcription) the musical material,

¹ “Everything we do is done by invitation. That invitation comes from oneself or from another person.” John Cage, “On Having Received the Carl Sczuka Prize for *Roaratorio*; Speech Given by John Cage at Donaueschingen, October 20, 1979”, http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/music/cage_roaratorio.html [15 May 2010].

² Steve Reich speaks about “documentary music”. Compare Steve Reich, “Note by the Composer”, in: Steve Reich, *Different Trains for String Quartet and Pre-recorded Performance Tape* (London, 1988).

³ Steve Reich, *Early Works* (New York, 1987).

so it is also a rhythmic-melodic object for Steve Reich.⁴ In his first tape compositions Reich works with fragments of speech as the musical material: he shortens it, repeats, layers it, with the result being a rhythmic-melodic structure in which we can no longer identify either the original message or the original meaning, although the expression is still contained in it.⁵ The text is gradually transformed, morphed, with the text changing into a musical object, yet without the musical object ceasing to be the original text.

Whereas in his early tape compositions *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out* Reich only works with the spoken text, which he transforms by motivic work, a different situation occurs in the case of *Different Trains*. Here Reich transcribes the speech tunes of his governess Virginia, a Pullman porter Lawrence Davis and Holocaust survivors, and similarly to Janáček notated their speech melody “as accurately as possible in music notation”.⁶ He then uses both the text and its musical transcription in parallel. Inosculation of the two objects results in a different type of morphing, whereby the text blends with the music and transforms into its musical parallel.

Even though neither in his confessions, nor in notes to his compositions nor in interviews does Reich use the term morphing, his processuality and emphasis on perceptible musical actions are a sort of equivalent of morphing.⁷ In his first repetitive compositions he laid emphasis on processes perceptible to the listener.⁸ Yet he did not term them morphing, but process.⁹ Whereas in the case of morphing at the turn of the century it first and foremost entailed as realistic as possible a sonic or even more frequently visual transformation between two different objects, Reich primarily strove to make the structure and its process audible and perceptible. Why, however, are we then guilty of terminological inaccuracy by indirectly replacing “process” with “morphing”? Because in this case the general process is concretised by the features of morphing. Whereas visual morphing of the past three decades covers a gamut of transformations ranging from similar to

⁴ “[...] by not altering its pitch or timbre, one keeps the original emotional power that speech has while intensifying its melody and meaning through repetition and rhythm.” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Come_Out_\(Reich\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Come_Out_(Reich)) [15 May 2010].

⁵ “The pieces ‘It’s Gonna Rain’ and ‘Come Out’ were an instance of finding something that existed, and by repetition you intensify what is naturally there, the rhythm that is there, the speech-melody tune that is really there [...] intensifying it so that you begin to hear the melody almost to the exclusion of the meaning of the words.” “Steve Reich in Conversation with Henning Lohner, Stuttgart, February 26 1986”, *Interface*, 17 (1988), p. 115. Quoted after: Naomi Cumming, “The Horror of Identification”, *Perspectives of New Music*, 35 (1), (Winter, 1997), p. 129.

⁶ Compare Steve Reich, “Note by the Composer”, in: Steve Reich, *Different Trains for String Quartet and Pre-recorded Performance Tape* (London, 1988).

⁷ “What I’m interesting in is a compositional process and a sounding music that are one and the same thing.” Steve Reich, *Writings about Music* (Coburg, 1974), p. 10.

⁸ “What I’m interesting in is a compositional process and a sounding music that are one and the same thing.” *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁹ “I am interested in perceptible processes. I want to be able to hear the process happening throughout the sounding music.” *Ibid.*, p. 9.

entirely different objects, on the sonic and musical level it most frequently concentrates on transformations of tonal objects into sonic objects and vice versa, such as, for example, the transformation of a voice into a wolf's howl in Olga Neuwirth's opera *Lost Highway* (2003). Although in the case of Reich it does not concern this kind of semantic change, this type of transformation and morphing comes under transformation of the text and music.

Mente and morphing

The composition *Mente* (2008) originated with the application of all the above-mentioned aspects and processes, concurrences, transformations and linkages between text and music. In the case of this multimedia composition (although two- and multi-channel audio versions of the composition exist, from the very beginning it was conceived with video) too, initially there was an invitation, an invitation to write a new composition, similarly to, for example, the case of Cage's *Roaratorio*. The invitation was immediately followed by considerations as to aurally perceptible processes as a means of relaying and accentuating the meaning of the texts, which continued through abstract morphing between the text and music and through a spiral returned to its use during the strengthening and layering of the text's semantic level.

When in February 2008 I was asked by the Director of the Zeitgenössische Oper Berlin, Andreas Rochhol, to choose for a new composition for the Poesiefestival Berlin one of the living German-language poets, my deliberations moved in various directions. Yet eventually a friend of mine drew my attention to Peter Waterhouse's collection *Prosperos Land* (2001).¹⁰ And this volume decided on my behalf. It is a series of micro-stories that originated on the basis of observing seemingly inconspicuous and insignificant events in Slovenia, Italy and Austria. Narrativity here is slowed down to the minimum, merely focusing on obscure transformations and concealed images. The poetic stories are short and resound into silence. Each page of the collection contains no more than three triplets. The atmosphere, slight movements, transformations, images and gestures were those which I decided to bolster by means of music. Similarly to the case of my previous operas, with this composition too I strove for musical "translations" of extra-musical events and meanings.

Andreas Rochhol's original intention was a joint performance by four composers and poets who would appear within a single concert. Initially, I conceived the joint performance with Peter Waterhouse as a staged reading and sound installation accentuating and translating his verses. The result, however, was different. Waterhouse could not attend the premiere and hence I began working on a composition that would give the impression of the presence of the absent poet on the stage and enhance the images and micro-stories of his poems. I replaced his presence by the author's reading, which served as the basis

¹⁰ Peter Waterhouse, *Prosperos Land* (Salzburg, 2001).

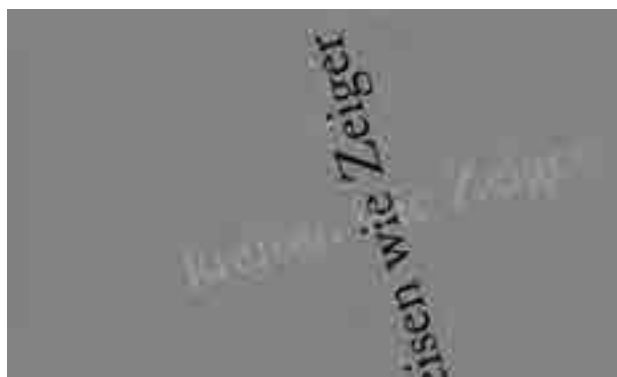
for all the musical and visual material. I concentrated both components into the plane of strengthening and translating the text: the main audio objects and video objects are the words and letters from Waterhouse's poems.



1a



1b



1c

Examples 1a, 1b, 1c: *Mente*, Part I: Text like audio and video objects, video by Tomáš Hrůza

I always subordinate the text to the musical structure and its tempo. That is why this time too I selected for the final textual collage individual phrases and verses from which I first created new stories and images that conformed to the musical tempo-rhythm and subsequently divided these into seven scenes. The comparison of the first two scenes with the original text clearly shows the starting point for the collage:

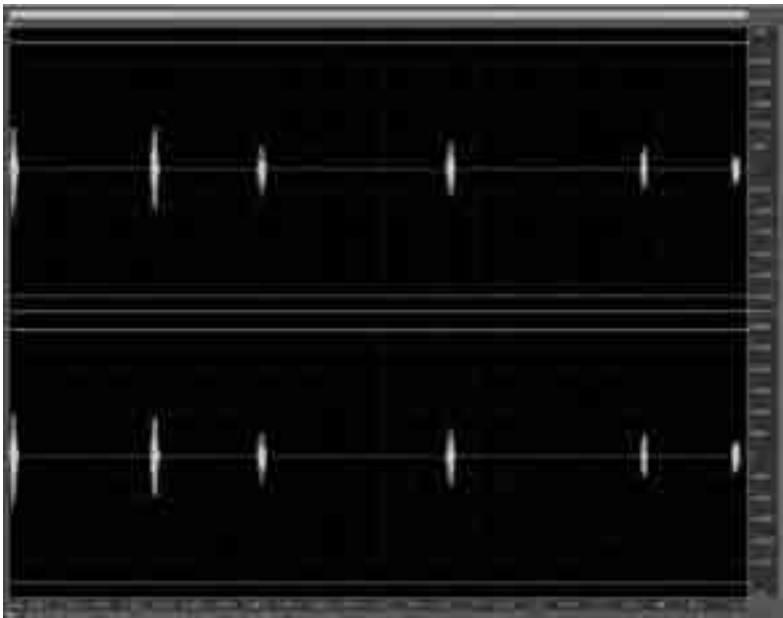
Table 1: Comparison of the textual collage in the composition *Mente*
with the original text in *Prosperos Land*

Vít Zouhar: <i>Mente</i> (2008)	Peter Waterhouse: <i>Prosperos Land</i> (2001)
I	(p. 8)
Die Bäume drehen sich	Die Bäume drehen sich
Die Häuser drehen sich	Die Häuser drehen sich
Die Äpfel rollen	Die Äpfel rollen
Die Kinder Rollen	(p. 9) Die Kinder Rollen
	Die Rundungen dreier Eimer antworten Mond Sonne Mars Gespräche Gespräche
Und die Wege kreisen wie Zeiger	An der Wegkreuzung Gespräch zweier Frauen Und die Wege kreisen wie Zeiger
II	(p. 78)
	Baum steht offen Das Haus unterirdisch
Die zehn Sterne flimmern in den Finger- spitzen	Der Baum macht einen Anfang Die zehn Sterne flimmern in den Finger- Spitzen
	Haus geht hinüber in Haus des Nachbarn

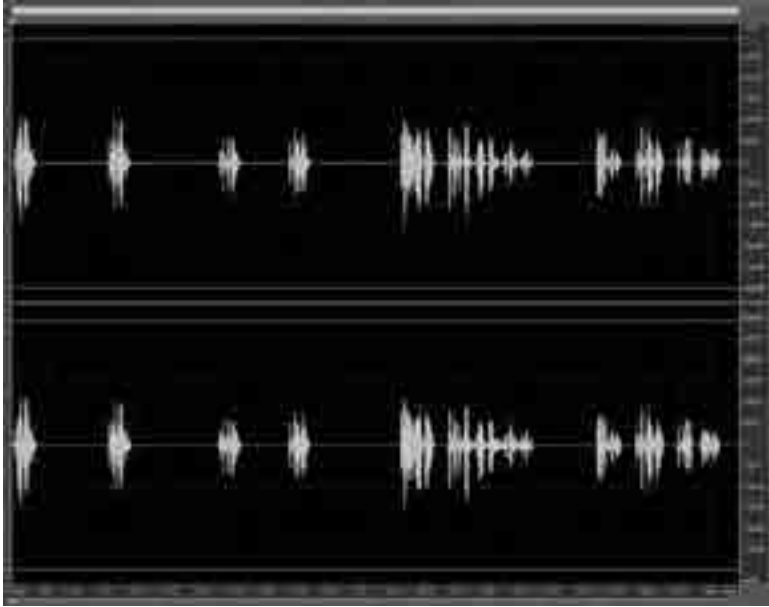
Similarly, the tempo of Waterhouse’s reading is subordinated to the rhythm of the composition. This is also evident from the first scene. In the first column, the time data determines the accession of individual verses in *Mente*, in the second it concerns the data from Waterhouse’s reading.

Table 2: Comparison of the tempo of reading in the composition *Mente* with Peter Waterhouse’s original reading

	<i>Mente</i>	<i>Prosperos Land</i>
I	0:00 Die Bäume drehen sich	0:00
	0:22 Die Häuser drehen sich	0:06
	0:39 Die Äpfel rollen	0:12
	1:10 Die Kinder Rollen	0:18
	1:41 Und die Wege	0:41
	1:56 kreisen wie Zeiger	0:43



Example 2: Waterhouse’s tempo of reading in the composition *Mente*



Example 3: Waterhouse's original reading

Recordings of selected fragments from the collection *Prosperos Land* served as the basis for *Mente*. They oscillate from meaning to sound, to melody, rhythm and back. From authentic reading to purely sonic, rhythmic or melodic objects. Individual words, such as “blinzeln” [twinkle], “flimmern” [glimmer], “Wege” [roads], etc. determine the character and the processes of individual scenes. For instance, in the first part “Wege” is the basis of accompanying sounds evoking the natural “landscape”. The seemingly natural sounds illustrating the landscape of the first scene are the processed and transformed words “Wege”, “Kinder” [children], “Bäume” [trees], etc. On the other hand, the second scene begins with a seemingly rhythmic-melodic pattern which, however, is in point of fact filtered from the reading of the text “Die zehn Sterne flimmern in den Fingerspitzen” [“Ten stars glimmer on the fingertips”]. The key word for the nature of the scene is the verb “flimmern”. During the course of this scene morphing occurs, whereby from the initial pulses the text gradually comes through in its original meaning. Similar processes also take place at the visual level: the constants of the first scene are the verbs “rollen” [roll] and “drehen sich” [turn]. Similarly to this scene being characterised by the seemingly natural sounds, the visual objects and processes are a direct parallel here too, this time of motion: the scene is built on the rotary principle of individual verses.¹¹ Conversely, for instance, the sixth scene remains an abstract image: the rhythmic-melodic model transforms into samples of the barely perceptible “Baum steht offen” [“The tree stands open”] and back.

¹¹ See Example 1c.

The periphrastic nature of the first scene is on the whole counterbalanced by the direct parallel in the final, seventh, scene, whereby the text “gehen Sonnen auf” [“suns are rising”] is accompanied by the symbolic ascensus of aliquot tones generated from this text.

Accordingly, morphing plays a double role in *Mente*. It is a technique perhaps remotely reminiscent of the Sprechgesang, as well as a means for expressing other content. It serves to direct the source text from narration to abstraction, as it is also a means for seeking a new meaning between the text and the music and for bolstering the meaning of the text by other musical means. Morphing as a continuation of the tradition of word-painting and musical rhetoric figures.

Translated by Hilda Hearne

***Mente* und Ausdrucksmöglichkeiten von Morphing im Melodram**

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag fokussiert an die Möglichkeiten von Morphing des Texts und der Musik. Im Kontext von Werke John Cages (*Indeterminacy*, *Roaratorio*) und Steve Reichs (*Comme Out*, *It's Gonna Rain*) zeigt am Beispiel der elektroakustischen Komposition *Mente* (2008) an die Möglichkeiten der Arbeit mit dem Text and der Grenze zwischen Bedeutung, Klang und Ton. Die Lyrik von Peter Waterhouse ist ein Ausgangspunkt sowie Musikmaterial in der Komposition *Mente*. Die prozessierte Waterhouse Lesung dient als Basis des Musikmaterials.

***Mente* a výrazové možnosti morfinu v současném melodramu**

Shrnutí

Stať se zabývá možnostmi morfinu textu a hudby. V kontextu děl Johna Cagea (*Indeterminacy*, *Roaratorio*) a Steve Reicha (*Comme Out*, *It's Gonna Rain*) ukazuje na elektroakustické skladbě *Mente* další možnosti práce s textem na pomezí významu, zvuku a tónu. Ve skladbě *Mente* jsou básně Petera Waterhouse textovou předlohou i základním hudebním materiálem. Procesované autorské čtení je základem hudebního materiálu.

Keywords

Vít Zouhar; John Cage; Steve Reich; morphing; electroacoustic compositions.