

“To touch life with art”

A conversation with composer Chaya Czernowin on the opera *Infinite Now*

Eva Van Daele

On 18 April 2017, Chaya Czernowin's new opera *Infinite Now* premiered in a production directed by Luk Perceval in Opera Vlaanderen in Ghent. The libretto of the opera is based on the text of Perceval's theatre production *FRONT Polyphonie* (2014). The opera confronts the testimonies of the First World War in *FRONT* with the surrealist short story *Homecoming* by the Chinese author Can Xue (the pseudonym of Deng Xiaohua, b. 1953). Both texts are dominated by situations of hopelessness and lack of prospects. It is exactly in these moments of despair that Czernowin sees the possibility of finding hope.

The following conversation is an abridged and slightly edited transcription¹ of two interviews with the composer: one during the rehearsal process and the other after the performances of *Infinite Now*.² These interviews shed light on the artistic vision and the work process of the composer who was intensely involved in the rehearsal process.

In the first interview, dated on 1 April 2017 in Opera Vlaanderen in Ghent, Czernowin testifies to the challenge of translating a composition, for which the electronics and spatialisation were conceived in a studio, to a specific hall. In this phase of the work process, when the singers and actors start the first rehearsals on scene and the electronics are being adapted to the acoustics of the hall, it is still unclear what the sounding result will be in the various performance venues (an opera hall in Ghent and Antwerp, a black box theatre in Mannheim, a modern concert hall in Paris). A special role in *Infinite Now* is reserved for the electronic music, resulting in overwhelming sound masses and creating an oppressive effect for the listener. Czernowin developed the electronics and the spatialisation in collaboration with Carlo Laurenzi, computer music designer at IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique). By placing the speakers around the audience, the electronic, amplified and processed live sounds emerge around the listener. Using the position of the speakers the composer is able to move sound throughout the space. This sound spatialisation also provides the opportunity to evoke spatial impressions surrounding the listener. This immersion of the listener in sound is a strategy Czernowin uses to strive for a

direct and physical impact on the listener. The search for an intense audience experience is also important for director Luk Perceval and is closely related to the idea of the 'infinite now' to which the title refers.

The spatialisation and the intimate experience of sound

Eva Van Daele (EVD): When I was in the hall I noticed that the structure of the musical layers was more clear. I could hear all the layers in the electronics more differentiated. Is that one of the reasons to use spatialisation? Does it allow you to do more complex things?

Chaya Czernowin (CC): What spatialisation does and what the room is doing is that instead of being one room, even though it is one room physically, audibly you can really change the room. It is not only the spatialisation. Spatialisation can be something very technical if it stands alone. You can have pieces where something goes from left to right and it is very acrobatic and it is very fantastic, but it means nothing.

EVD: In this piece the spatialisation is very essential.

CC: The reason for that is the interaction between the spatialisation, what is spatialised and why it is spatialised in a certain way. So for example, there are parts where we hear from all the speakers the same thing, which really connects the room and gives it a very strange feeling, because you hear the same thing from [everywhere]. If you think about it, nowhere in our reality do we have this kind of experience. It kind of opens the room and it is as if the whole room is in your ears. You do not have the sense of what is close, what is farther away. This goes with certain types of materials. And then we suddenly have the room becoming a huge place outside and we have all these types of layers and layers of white noise, of faraway noises, so that you actually make the room much larger. You have the moment where there is a bird and the bird is actually moving in the hall and it gives the whole passage this vitality.

EVD: How is this related to the idea of the 'infinite now' or to the idea of the characters who are being trapped, who cannot escape a certain situation? Is that related to the audience who is surrounded, who can actually feel the space around them instead of just a frontal hearing?

CC: Very much. I think this is very much a part of the whole idea. But I must also say that this is not the first time that I am looking for that type of immersion. Because in general, or in the last years, that is the audible experience that I am looking for: that you are immersed in sound and you can hear sound in a very

intimate way from very, very close to you. That is one way to really get it, but sometimes I try to do the same with an orchestra sitting on the stage.

EVD: Do you think it sometimes feels claustrophobic for the audience, as a situation they cannot escape?

CC: Well, let us start from the fact that every new music concert is a claustrophobic concert. Because in an exhibition [if you] do not like the painting, you go away. In a new music concert—that is one of the problems that people say, there is no audience, because you are forced to sit and sometimes really suffer. But more to the point: the point of claustrophobia at times is very important here, yes. In some of the places I really tried to create a very closed room. And then I think it is physically.

EVD: Especially at the end of the second act, where the orchestra in the electronics makes a massive *crescendo*. It really has an impact, I think, on the listener.

CC: And I think that in the sixth act, you have not heard it with the orchestra, but when this big *g* comes in. Everybody is on the *g* and it is continuous and *fortississimo* and that is going to be very hard to take. And it is very important to me.

EVD: But in your music and in the idea [the concept of *Infinite Now*] there is also some sort of opening at the end.

CC: Absolutely.

EVD: Do we hear this opening in the spatial surroundings?

CC: The sixth act is very important, because then you get this *g* which is so *erdrückend* in German, it is oppressive. It is absolutely oppressing and then you have this kind of strange chorale with the soloists that we worked on yesterday and you have all the voices of water, of things beginning to—and you have the voices from afar and they will be very quiet. So in a way it is very sad: those remnants of voices, of people, and the water and the chorale. But I think it also carries a lot of hope. Because if you are sad and you cry, there is always hope. It is when you don't cry, there is no hope.

Waiting and the creation of a physical space

EVD: How does the idea of this timelessness and the idea of the *Infinite Now* relate to the use of space? Is that a sort of way to shift the focus from the time? Is it related to the time experience?

CC: The truth is that when we are in a process or when we are in a hurry or when we are alive and we are doing things, we always have an aim and we always go from a to b. We always have our days divided and we always have to be in certain places at certain times. But those places between rooms, we actually do not really experience them, because everything is just [about] what you need to do.

EVD: And very focused on one direction.

CC: Exactly, and what you need to accomplish in that place. There is very little time for dreaming, there is very little time to get lost and there is also very little time to become really aware of your surroundings. There is a text I wrote and it still makes sense for *Infinite Now*, it is even stronger in *Infinite Now*. I wrote it for a piece of mine, *White Wind Waiting*, which is an orchestral piece. (...) It is without electronics but it is really about spaces. You can read it and this is for a piece, which is an acoustic piece, but it really speaks about the spaces, and there is something about it in *Infinite Now*. It is different in *Infinite Now*, but you will see the connection.

White Wind Waiting is a piece about waiting. Waiting: time is hovering – there is an expectation and also memory but nothing is actually happening right at the present moment. A lacuna in time when one looks around, noticing the dust – grains slowly floating in the last ray of sun still lingering through the side window...

The piece peels away layer after layer of this notion – in a progression of expectation and memory. But is someone waiting at all? Is someone there at all or is everything and everyone gone already and only the sun ray still lingers through the side window, in a place which has been long abandoned, deserted, forgotten... (Czernowin, *White Wind Waiting*, 2013. © SCHOTT MUSIC, Mainz.)

EVD: I think this is very related [to *Infinite Now*]: the idea of waiting, not necessarily on something.

CC: Yes, that is why I thought about this. In *Infinite Now* you have this material and then you have this other material and then you actually find this strange

connection between them, that you would never think exists and the connection is exactly between the moment. There is this moment of total desperation and then there is the moment, right at the end of that moment, where you know everything will continue because you feel you are breathing. And that is that small waiting, because when that happened, you actually have continued. So I think this is the connection. Opening up the room means that you are not using the room as for the scenes it will be like this, then it is a palace, and then it is an office. That is why I really support the decision of Philip [Busmann, responsible for the scenography and the video] to use something very simple, straightforward, something that changes only structurally basically. I think it is really strong what he did and the fact that it is so big [the wall, the only piece of scenery] is very helpful. He could project on it, things that are endless. So first of all also the space of the infinite is very important here. This was a piece where I really tried to learn to create a space that never ends. Not like only a bigger room or a smaller room but also a room where actually it goes forever. I think that at some moment in the piece, in the electronics, you can really feel that. And this is a great relief from the claustrophobia. So for example in the end of the first act. If you remember, it is very little. The end of the first act is very difficult because you always hear those low pitches, this war kind of atmosphere, the internal war kind of atmosphere. Then at a certain point there is a place where he says in the fringe “I have never seen so many people” or “jamais” and at that point you actually hear many, many people, but they are from far, far away and I love this place so much because it gives so much comfort. Because instead of this really claustrophobic and really oppressive space, you have a huge place outside, full with people, they are far, far away and that is for me a point of relief. It is not semantic, it is just the audible effect that I use stuff from a kilometre away.

EVD: Almost to create a virtual space.

CC: Well, not virtual, a physical space. It is really a physical space. Do you know the chorale in the end? (...) It was a great discovery for me and it exactly speaks about that and I will show you exactly what I mean. What I mean is that this is one of the points that I am the most happy about, even though I have not heard it.

(...)

CC: There is a physical space that is created through sound and something is manipulated there, but it is not imaginary. It is almost as if there is the object and it is really the object. So you have the *g* and everybody is holding the *g* [the brass section loudly plays a *g*]. (...) Then the singer comes and she is going to *g quarter-*

sharp, she is very quiet but you will hear her. And then all this is happening: they are starting to breath inside the *g* and they are opening it from inside. It is almost as if the *g* is an object and they are pushing.

EVD: They can also push the limits.

CC: Yes, but they are nothing. The object is so huge and they are like dwarfs but they succeed. And I never thought about it, that it is a picture of overcoming against this destiny. It is overcoming against a huge destiny. So look what happens there here on *d quarter-sharp*, *g quarter-sharp*, go to *g quarter*, and then they go, one goes to *quarter-sharp* and one to *quarter-low*, *quarter-sharp*. So that inside the *g* you start seeing all these things happening and that is what my dream is and I think it will happen. I mean I heard it from where I was sitting, which means that if it would be around everybody will hear it. So they are stopping on a *d* and *d flat* and the *g* still holding and *d sharp* and then they have all these chords you know, they are in the middle of the *d* around the *d sharp*. There are all those small dramas inside the whole of the *g*.

EVD: But you would really call it the creation of a sort of physical space.

CC: Yes, I would not call it an imaginative space. Because it exists, it really exists. And the approach to it is physical. (...)

EVD: Almost pushing—

CC: —an object. It is not like this harmony is doing that, no. It is physically.

EVD: And you probably feel it physically.

CC: Yes. That is exactly what I mean to [do], I aim to [do] that.

Performance venues for *Infinite Now*

EVD: Now *Infinite Now* is here in Ghent. How different will it be when you do it in Antwerp or in Paris?

CC: Oh, it will be very similar I hope. It may be a question of what Sylvain [Cadars] said “composing the hall” so that it sounds right (Cadars). [Czernowin refers here to the phrase “composing the space” of Cadars.]

EVD: During the composition you did not really have this specific hall in mind?

CC: No. It was not written to a specific hall.

EVD: Was it written for an opera hall?

CC: It is very interesting. Because actually I think that this hall is quite perfect for it [Opera Vlaanderen, Ghent], because it is like a head, as if you are sitting inside a head. I like the intimacy of that hall very much. It has a lot of seats but it is intimate. It has a very immersive feeling to it. I do not mind that it has the history because this piece also carries a lot of history.

EVD: An opera hall also carries certain expectations or certain scripts.

CC: Because of this it really highlights what we do differently. So for me it is a gain. I knew when I was writing that this was the hall.

The Zeno paradox

EVD: You talked about certain wrinkles in time in the composition (Iannotta).³ How is this related to the idea of the ‘infinite now’?

CC: It is the Zeno paradox. If you start to divide and look inside and create and see always more details of that moment and go deeper and more and more into this moment and the more you are going, the more you discover; you will not get anywhere else.

EVD: Are the wrinkles specific moments or is it more an idea for the whole piece?

CC: It is something I realised afterwards, I never thought that this is—but that is what the piece in a way does. If you think about it, you have five acts and the structure basically is something very similar. Always the same opening, then this kind of interlude and then the two materials. So it is almost like a variation of the same thing, just going down and going down. [Czernowin probably refers to five acts because the structure of sixth and final act diverges from the others: the beginning is strongly abridged and the two texts, *Homecoming* and *FRONT*, are introduced simultaneously instead of consecutively.]

EVD: So would you say that the wrinkle is deeper at the end or that it becomes more focused in a way?

CC: You start from a situation, a terrible situation. You go inside it, you go inside it even more, you go inside it and in the end, in the last act, you find the basis of it

and then you find some hope. But it is the same situation and how deep you are in that situation. That is structurally what is happening here.

Music that doesn't sound like music

EVD: How important is the visual aspect for the immersion?

CC: Well, I think it will add to the whole immersive quality of the piece, I don't know. In some way this is a piece to just listen at home recorded beautifully in a room with closed eyes. But it is a music theatre and I think that it will be very strong on the stage. And I cannot wait to see what Luk [Perceval] is doing with it and Philip [Bussmann].

EVD: How do you think about the idea of synaesthesia?

CC: Someone told me the biggest compliment and for some people it would be a curse. She said to me: "How can you do it that your music never sounds like music?" For me it is very important. Because I do not want music to sound like music [with emphasis], you know. "Oh this is such an elegant piece", "this was so beautiful": I am not interested in that. It is a very synaesthetic idea, that for example I would like to put a pile of mud on the stage through my instrumental writing. There is a piece on the internet, it is called *Ayre*. It is quite new and it is a very nice performance with the score. They put it on the internet ("Chaya Czernowin — *Ayre*"). If you hear this piece, it is really about putting an object and moving it and that is what we talked about, that kind of this virtual, physical world. So that is a very good example of that.

EVD: So you relate most to the physical, to the more haptic aspect?

CC: Lately, lately. I was totally the opposite and extremely speculative when I was younger.

After the performances of *Infinite Now* in Ghent, Antwerp, Mannheim and a concertante version in Paris, I speak Chaya Czernowin again on 29 June 2017 in CENTQUATRE-PARIS, a cultural platform in Paris, where Czernowin teaches a masterclass composition as part of the ManiFeste Académie organised by IRCAM. We discuss the experience she searches for the listener and how she aspires to immerse the audience in sound. Who are her musical examples in search of this listening experience and what are the evolutions in her own music theatre? After the performances we revisit the question of performing the piece in different venues and speak about the tension between the composition of a new contemporary piece and the performance in an opera hall that brings along certain traditions and expectations.

The experience of the listener

EVD: For the immersion and the experience of the listener do you have a kind of view of what he or she should experience or is there is a world created in which they can get inside?

CC: If you are looking at the video [an unreleased video recording of *Infinite Now*] which is really amazing because nobody knew that they were filming. (...) I thought it would not get it and the strengths of the direction of Luk, but it is just the opposite. You see their faces from close up, there are a lot of close-ups and you see the group, you see different parts of the group and the way that they look: it is as if they are always looking and they are stunned by something, they are looking outside themselves and it is going throughout the two and a half hours. That kind of looking at something which is just discovered and happening. For me, the ideal listener would exactly have that expression: that you are stunned, you are glued to something, because at any moment something is changing, something that you do not expect is going to. Not with fear and not with joy and not with anything, but your perception is occupied fully.

EVD: When people talk about experience, it is often combined with the term aesthetic, as an aesthetic experience. Would you call it that?

CC: No, I do not like it. I am constantly trying to—and I am working very hard at this break between the borders of the aesthetic experience and the real experience. This is the work that I am doing. This is why my work is so metaphorical. That is why it is not so easy to analyse it only in musical terms.

EVD: Is this kind of experience something that you can find if you look at the history of opera or music theatre? Are there other composers you relate to?

CC: A lot of them. There is a kind of a row of composers who always broke through conventions and really brought things closer to life. Gesualdo is the person I have been listening to, whenever I need to listen to something I listen to Gesualdo, because of his crazy harmonies, how unexpected they are and what they do to the phrase and to the structure. He is not the only one. I am thinking about Domenico Scarlatti's sonatas. I am thinking about the last period of Beethoven, Schumann...

EVD: And in opera, in the tradition of opera?

CC: That is more difficult. But if I think about my two role models: Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which if you think about it is really a huge break with the tradition, and *Wozzeck* [Alban Berg], as opposed to *Lulu* [Berg], because I find *Lulu* much more traditional in the sense of the harmonies, in the way that the soloists and the emotions are brought to the fore.

Composing for the opera scene

EVD: Do you feel that you create something for the opera institute, for the opera scene?

CC: I would like to think so, but of course it is very controversial. We have seen it in the performances. But I must say that especially in Belgium, for a lot of people it was a renewal for the opera scene, a lot of them of course left in the middle or were very angry. But to tell you something, I would love this to be done in some kind of ruin of a factory, a totally different place, not the classical opera. But on the other hand I think that the connection to the opera tradition is very important here. So if I call it an event—so if I think about just calling it an event and making it a big event—as a promotion, we are losing something. We are losing the connection to history, which is so important and this opera is very connected to history and I think that that connection is alive, also in terms of the genre.

EVD: How did you feel about the performances in the different halls, in the different venues?

CC: I have learned a lot from them. So I have learned that a piece like that, that deals with spatialisation and with sound on such a strong level, it really needs very good acoustics. In Paris in the Philharmonie, for me, the acoustics were by far the best. Of course this is not an opera hall and the orchestra was not in the pit and we could not have the stage. The other halls were comparable. Of course the hall in Ghent was the hardest. But I also learned that if you have a really good sound engineer—and Carlo [Laurenzi] was there and I was always trying to help with that—and if you have really good people working in that regard, they can really affect the way that the hall resonates. That was very exciting to discover, you can really change the hall.

EVD: For this piece, as for your previous pieces, you have used the word “opera”. Does it mean something different from “music theatre” for you?

CC: *Musiktheater*? No, it is the same. Maybe *Musiktheater* is even a better name. (...)

EVD: You told me in our previous interview about an evolution in your work to more physical, to more immersive qualities. Can we also find that in your music theatre?

CC: Absolutely, yes. *Infinite Now* is extremely immersive. That is when it holds, because not for everybody it works, for some people it is torture [laughs]. But for the people that succeed to immerse in it, that is the thing that works. The creation of immersion, the state of immersion and as said it is perceptual, creating so many layers where music happens that you must drown in them. People spoke about *Infinite Now* as it is so elemental or minimalist and that is actually a very superficial reading. It is an extremely complex and maximalist piece, but it is all in the interior.

EVD: Let us look at the evolution in your music theatre. *Pnima* [Czernowin’s first piece for the scene, premiered in 2000] is about the impossibility of communication and now in *Infinite Now* there is this focus on the vitality of human beings.

CC: Through the desperation, yes.

EVD: Would you say that this is a different vision of humanity?

CC: I think that even though people have seen *Infinite Now* as an extremely dark piece and I have gotten also a lot of emails about it, people who loved it, but thought it was the darkest thing they have ever seen, things like that. A lot of

people have written about that, but nevertheless I feel that for me, there is a lot of hope that comes out. It is not only so stark dark, there is a lot of beauty that emanates from it. Really it is not only rough. I can tell you what one person told me, that for me was really beautiful. (...) Do you know the story of *Pinokkio*? She said that she felt as if she was swallowed inside the whale and she was carried by the whale and it was a very protected feeling actually, even though she was inside a whale. For me it is very similar to how I felt about this piece composing it. Even though it deals with such difficult situations, it carries them in a way with a lot of gratitude for our senses.

EVD: In the score of *Pnima* you wrote that there is “no plot, only mental situations, no singers who are actors” (Czernowin, *Pnima*). I think that applies also to *Infinite Now*?

CC: That is very much the same thing.

EVD: Is that your vision on how you want to make opera?

CC: Well, it is changing all the time. I do not have a constant vision. I think maybe there is a vision or there is something that is throughout: the idea or the wish to really create something that is always closer to life, to always come closer to life and to touch life with art.

Hope as a political statement

EVD: Can we really make a clear distinction between the visual aspect of Luk Perceval and your auditory aspect?

CC: They are very distinct. They are very different: Luk shows everything as one world and for me the merging of the two different strands [*FRONT* and *Homecoming*] was extremely important, and it creates one of the most important elements of the music, elements of suspense too. In that sense it is very different, that is one thing. On the other hand, I think where we really connect, and that is very important, is in the notion of—that I talked about before—the kind of open eyes that never close, to see everything.

EVD: The focus.

CC: The focus and the elongation of time and the giving up of the individual, the individual identity. Also in Luk’s direction, you do not have ‘this person is now talking and you can see them talking and they are moving or that person is’.

EVD: They are not really characters, not distinctive individuals, but rather a representation of humanity.

CC: Exactly. And to think about this whole as a representation of humanity—there was this critique in *Res Musica* (Tosi). It was in French and I loved it. It was for me quite a dream critique because it said that this opera is really actually about the state of the world and I felt like this was so true and that was what I was meaning to do and I was so happy that it was taken that way. Yes, the state of the world and that is the state of humanity in a way.

EVD: You say that *Infinite Now* is a piece about the world today; to what extent would you call it political?

CC: It is also political because it speaks of the intrusive influence that politics have on our life on the one hand: the war, the news. It is also political that the human, the person, the possibility of a person to hope, to feel is stronger than the politics and that is a political statement. I think that political statement is hiding inside *Infinite Now*.

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¹ I have added some clarifying comments in square brackets in the transcription. The interviews were conducted as part of the research for my master’s thesis, where the complete transcription of the interviews can be found.

² Performances: 18, 20, 22 and 23 April 2017, Opera Vlaanderen, Ghent; 30 April, 3, 5 and 6 May 2017, Opera Vlaanderen, Antwerp; 26, 28 and 31 May, 7 and 18 June 2017, Nationaltheater, Mannheim; 14 June 2017, Cité de la Musique, Paris.

³ Here I should correct myself, rereading the interview with Clara Iannotta makes clear that Czernowin’s exact words were “the time within the wrinkle” and “a wrinkle in our perception” (Iannotta).