

Singing the Space Together

Reflections on *Harmonias*

Nicola van Straaten is invited to write a response to the musical and choreographic performance "Harmonias" - a dynamic and layered quartet of song and sound, as four performers guide the audience through expressions of togetherness, harmony and expanded practices of polyphony.

Let's start with the end and then we'll get to the beginning.
No, no. Let's start with the moment just after the beginning, and then we'll get to the end.
Or...
no.

Let's just start here:

There is magic dripping all over this performance.
Anyone can sense it.

Magic in the simplicity and emptiness of the performance, revealing its fullness and complexity. Magic in the eyes and mouths of the performers, who create entire terrains with their voices. Magic in the intimate stretches of proximity, in the spaces between each sounding body, contained by music and transformed by shifting light. Just... magic.

Harmonias is predominantly a musical performance that, according to the programme notes, "invites artists to examine, from different perspectives, the notions of harmony in music and its embodied expressions of togetherness." The sixty-minute work was conceived and directed by Alexandre Achour in co-authorship with four artists and performers, Dunja Crnjanski, Esther Cowens, Sadim Alzafari and Shruti Bode. It premiered at Uferstudios in Berlin, in Studio 14 on 14 September 2023.



With integrated audio description, the work begins as the voice of Emmilou Rössling describes (in German) the space and stage of the performance. Rössling developed the audio-description in collaboration with Silja Korn and their words are also projected (in English) on the back wall of the simple and open set design of Studio 14. Dark floors, four chairs and some instruments already on stage, a raised tribunal for the audience, a minimal chandelier-like structure of vertical fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling. This opening act of description settles the audience and grounds the piece, feeling almost like a meditation or visualization technique for arriving not only in the body of the theatre, but also in one's own body.

Throughout the rest of the work, Rössling's voice, accompanied by the translated subtitles, enter and exit - not often, but at very specifically chosen moments. And the descriptions don't just describe; they provide little gestures that contribute to the artistic vision of the work as a whole. Sometimes, they offer a clue of what is about to happen, or a piece of information about a song or a performer that would otherwise be opaque. They shape and draw our attention, subtlety, but clearly. It is a fine example of how audio description can function as beautiful artistic material and dramaturgical skill. But of course, audio description is not just an artistic add-on. It is first and foremost an access tool and there is also the option for a complete audio description specifically designed and provided for blind and visually impaired audience members.

After introducing the space, the performers enter, introducing and describing themselves through song. They each sing out their brief and sometimes humorous self-description-composition in what I'm assuming is their mother tongue, after which each performer takes a turn to translate the song of another into English. A call and response style repetition from the other three performers punctuates (or rather elevates) the closing line from each self-introduction song. And from the get go, by hearing the entangled voices present in each individual's introduction, we witness a fundamental concept of the work at play - how harmony requires a "many". (Har-many?) The programme notes situate the performance firmly in plurality and polyphony, proposing that "musical polyphony becomes a means to explore concept of authorial polyphony with the idea to create a common without letting go of singularities."



From here on out the piece unfolds into what I can only describe as an aural and musical landscape that carries me through, across, over and under a sea of emotional states. The performers skillfully move through a variety of different songs that emerge from their personal and cultural biographies, held by a simple but very effective changing light design. The almost empty stage allows the largeness of their voices to resonate fully. The way in which the performers sing is in no way dramatic, but rather deeply authentic. Choreography and composition begin to merge as gesture, hands, facial expressions and the passing intimate exchanges between performers seem to organically support each song, as it blends into another. At different points, the electric piano, three djembe drums and the oud lend their support. And sometimes pre-recorded sounds and drones from the speakers help to hold the space.

This soundscape, so spaciouly composed of different musical, cultural, linguistic and personal backgrounds, allows me to also enter into the work from my own position. Sitting in the tenderly held performative space, awash by musical beauty feels somehow like laying my head in the lap of a caring friend. I enter and somehow, I am entered. As the work progresses my body responds in almost embarrassingly visceral ways. The power of their voices causes me to hold my breath, tense that specific corner of my back. In some moments I laugh and then smile from a deep sadness. I allow a small tear in other moments. Grief is made palpable, joy made accessible. And throughout the piece, like clockwork, I receive a showering stream of goosebumps.

The programme notes also provide lyrics and information offering context for the different songs. We're able to read the words and understand more of the historical context of the African American and Moluccan dances and songs that Esther Cowen shares with us. We can follow the touching lyrics evoking queer love that Sadim Alzafari has written to accompany a traditional Arabic song. We



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learn of Moba, working songs, but also other traditional love songs and songs about nature, that pianist Dunja Cmjanski offers from different regions of former Yugoslavia. And from her Hindustani Classical tradition and training, we witness Shruti Bode explore the emotional state of fear with her voice, and understand how the piece is beautifully closed with an evening Raag, intentionally sung to produce a state of calmness. There are songs with translated lyrics available for us to read, and other songs that cannot possibly be translated. Such as the loudly uplifting moment where all four singers are exploding with their own separate songs and sounds at the same time; a rise of voices that are strangely melodic in the many-folded and multi-voiced cacophony.

I am no musician. Whilst writing this I have become aware of my apparent lack of musical vocabulary and my child-like understanding of things like tone and melody. In all honesty, I cannot speak to the intricacies of the musical skill and vocal craftsmanship in this piece; I know just enough to comprehend how much complexity I am missing. The technicalities of the term "polyphony" in musical theory have been explained to me in the past by several musician colleagues and friends, but I can only come at it from my own poetic angle: that polyphony is some kind of mathematical and mystical co-existence of different times and timing happening simultaneously. As a dancer, I can understand something of timing and the ways in which space is implicated in time. And as a person quite busy with history and lineage, I can also understand something of the ways in which identities are also implicated by space and time. So despite my musical ignorance, I cannot miss the extreme dexterity of skillful "togetherness through difference" that is apparent throughout the work, something that must have been intentionally nourished and tended to throughout the rehearsal process and is certainly grounded in a practice of profound listening.

Although evoking togetherness, difference, lineage and continuity - *Harmonias* is somehow not "about" anything of these things, it is these things. It is both the practice and performance of an expanded polyphony - polyphonic narratives, polyphonic languages, polyphonic lands, origins and biographies. The simultaneous proposal and practice of different times, tones, lines, stories, melodies and voices existing in a state of togetherness feel very political to me. Just to witness this as possible, in a musical capacity but also in a relational capacity. It feels ever so gently radical. To watch a performance that is in no way intellectually dry or conceptually demanding, but dripping with emotion and magic, and then to have that performance embody something that feels so politically responsive to our current moment of increasing divisiveness, is truly a gift. If, in the chaos of our times, you find a chance to see this show, I can only recommend it.



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Concept and artistic direction: Alexandre Achour **In co-authorship with:** Sadim Alzafari, Shruti Bode, Esther Cowens, Dunja Cmrianski / **Performance:** Sadim Alzafari, Shruti Bode, Esther Cowens, Dunja Cmrianski / **Artistic collaboration and sound design:** Gregorio Rodriguez Orozco / **Light design:** Anja Sekulić / **Audio description:** Emmilou Roessling, Silja Korn / **Social Media:** Aisha Mia Lethen Bird / **Consultations on dramaturgy and accessibility:** Saša Asentić / **Executive producer:** Stephan Wagner / A production by Alexandre Achour in collaboration with Uferstudios