

DONNA ZAPF & CHRISTOPHER BUTTERFIELD / a conversation about language, music, and translation

Donna Zapf and Christopher Butterfield talked by video conference on March 7, 2014. Both studied music at the University of Victoria in the late 1960s/early 1970s and both of their interdisciplinary careers are founded in their performance of and love of contemporary music. Donna was active in Canadian contemporary arts in the 1980s and 1990s, presenting new music concerts at the Western Front, working for CBC radio, and participating on the board of the Canadian Music Centre and as president of the Vancouver New Music society, among other activities. She was on the faculty of the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University for many years, and also the director of the Graduate Liberal Studies program at Simon Fraser. She is the director of Graduate Liberal Studies at Duke University in Durham NC, and has a doctorate in musicology from the University of Victoria. At a young age, Christopher sang in King's College Choir, Cambridge. Later he studied composition with Rudolf Komorous at the University of Victoria and with Bülent Arel at SUNY Stony Brook. For fifteen years he lived in Toronto, playing in a band, reciting sound poetry, conducting, composing, and making performance art. In 1992 he returned to the University of Victoria to teach composition. Recently he coordinated and curated the Cage 100 Festival in Victoria celebrating American composer John Cage's 2012 centenary; he also judged the 2012 International Gaudeamus Composition competition in Utrecht, Netherlands, where Bosquet, his piece for 22 flutes and 1 cello, was performed.

Donna Zapf: Christopher, what are you working on besides the translations of Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes's plays?

Christopher Butterfield: I'm preoccupied with writing an introduction for the book of translated plays of Ribemont-Dessaignes, and there's nothing on the table compositionally right now at all. I seem to have come to the end of a long period of work. That being said, there are the long-term projects. There's the piano trio *Madame Wu said...* that I've worked on for a few years and that will take a few more to finish. It's going to be quite long. In performance it will probably last about three days. It's a piece of music that challenges various ideas of what duration

should be and what location should be for experiencing a piece of music. It's a kind of sequel to *Pavilion of Heavenly Trousers*, an installation I made in 2004 for which I took two romantic novels about China, wrote them out, interleaved, in pencil on yellow legal paper and then recorded the resulting narrative, which lasted about twenty-seven hours. All 603 pages were mounted in the Lab at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, and the recorded story played continuously during the six weeks the installation was up. In a perfect world I'd be up every morning working on *Madame Wu said...*, but I haven't got to that stage of perfection yet.

DZ: I want to start our conversation in the territory of your interdisciplinary interests in reference to your composition, your teaching, your performance, and your interest in language. To begin with, the decade-long composition of your opera *Project for an Opera of the Twentieth Century G.S.: something that happened once and it is very interesting*¹ which premiered in Banff in 1998. Can you talk a little bit about the opera?

CH: In the mid-1980s, I read a possible libretto for a possible opera by the writer John Bentley Mays in *C Magazine*, the art magazine in Toronto. The thing that interested me immediately was that it was about a location, Zurich—in 1916—a city in a neutral country during the First World War, a place of refuge or escape for people from around Europe. There was a street called the Spiegelgasse. At number 14, Lenin was basically in exile for a few years prior to his return to Petrograd in 1917, where, of course, he started the revolution, and at the other end of the street at number 1 was a bar called the Holländische Meierei where writers and artists created a cabaret they called the Cabaret Voltaire. This was the famous Dada cabaret run by Hugo Ball, Richard Huelsenbeck, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, and various other dispossessed people. John Bentley Mays' take on this opera, I got immediately. It was an opera about the failure of revolution—Dada conducted the biggest revolution in art in the 20th century and the Bolsheviks the biggest revolution in politics. Bringing these two worlds together was for me an instantaneous happy incident. And the thing that solidified it further was that this was not a historical opera, not a show-and-tell; it was a poeticizing of these people in this place. Historians tell us that the Dadaists and Lenin had nothing to do with

1 *Project for an Opera of the Twentieth Century G.S.: something that happened once and it is very interesting* (libretto by John Bentley Mays), re-titled *Zürich 1916* [music drama in 13 scenes], 9 voices, small orchestra [16 players], 1986–98).

each other but John, through his fractured syntax, creates a sense of the world they shared in a state of daily change.

For the Dada artists at the Cabaret Voltaire, language was put on hold. Something new was taking place and nobody was sure what it was. Hugo Ball was the presiding genius of the Cabaret Voltaire—not necessarily his more famous colleague Tristan Tzara—because Ball was really the one who started it. And once he recognized that the Cabaret Voltaire was getting too popular, he chose to leave Zurich. He didn't want Dada Cabaret to be a spectacle. He didn't want it to be documented and theorized. It was simply an event that had changed people's thinking. He retired to the country—became almost a hermit in the mountains in Switzerland—until his death in the late 1920s. I always loved that he understood that Dada was profoundly revolutionary—and we know it to have been so because so much of what happens in the art world is basically informed by Dada whether people acknowledge it or not.

DZ: An exploration that one associates with the Dadaists or the Dada movement was to do with language, which you yourself have explored and performed. I'm thinking of the sound poetry of Kurt Schwitters. Is your own thinking in terms of language and music influenced by some of the formal issues that were at play in the world of Dada?

CH: I've always been interested in a meeting place between music and language where two things happen, two sets of signs meet each other and combine to form a third set of independent meanings. You have a recombination that goes on between these two highly complex systems, one of language and one of music, where neither one has the principal place. (Somebody asked Beckett why he never let his texts be set to music and he said, well because music always wins.) When I look back at the work I've done setting texts of various kinds, I've actually been happiest with things that are either nonsense, are either meaningless sounds, vocal sounds, or else language that approaches nonsense, that may be syntactically all over the place, may be highly repetitive—this is certainly what goes on in the opera. The language does not convey a linear unfolding of an image or a narrative in any sense. It really is purely the sound of the words that combines with the musical setting in a complementary way so that you end up in a place where, as the composer, I cannot know what the result is going to be.

As you know I've set a fair amount of French. I think I'm happy doing French because I'm not completely fluent and the texts I've chosen are almost untranslatable, frankly, they simply don't translate well. There's an absolutely essential aspect of French-ness to them that you cannot get in English. To push it a step further, there's sound poetry written, for example, by francophone Claude Gauvreau: *Jappements à la lune*, eight sound poems which he wrote at the end of his life and which I set to music in 1989.² There is no way one can know the "meaning" of these poems. Also, I don't wish to assign any, at least not on a conscious basis. I've always worked with pre-compositional structures in place, and in the case of setting nonsense or meaningless language, I've always found it fruitful to create a structure and then impose it on the text—this way I'm creating associations which I would never arrive at under normal circumstances of intent, taste, etc.

DZ: As you were talking, Christopher, I was just reflecting that the theme of this issue of *The Capilano Review* is *languages* and in particular translations and cross-translations. I was thinking about that topic in terms of your work because you have translated among the territories of what we have often institutionalized as discrete arts, even though they never are: the visual arts, theatre, literature, dance, music. I'm curious about your thoughts on moving among various arts. Your creative work contains everything from concerns with poetry to a deep understanding of the visual arts to collaborations with dancers and theatre pieces and sound poetry which must lean very heavily towards our own training in music. What are your thoughts?

CH: When I look back on how I came to do the things that I do, I think of the things I was interested in. I spent my childhood singing in a choir as a kind of professional that really is as much of a basis for life as anything could have been, because we rehearsed ten times a week, and sang services in the college chapel seven times a week. We made records, and toured. As I got older I became very interested in theatre. I wasn't very good as an actor but I was very interested in *kinds* of theatre, particularly the Expressionist Theatre of the very late 19th and very early 20th centuries. Anybody from Wedekind to Georg Kaiser to Ernst Toller to Karl

2 *Jappements à la lune* (text by Claude Gauvreau), 1990. Song cycle for mezzo soprano, piccolo, English horn, bass clarinet, piano, percussion, violin, viola, cello, and double bass.

Capek in Czechoslovakia, you know those highly idealistic and non-naturalistic plays dealing with social and political problems, with the state of the individual in society, the state of the worker or the proletariat in society, and the tragedy of the individual.

And then I fell into writing music because even though I had spent my early life completely submerged in a musical milieu, music was the thing that remained the most mysterious to me. So the fact that I would be a composer and not go into theatre or writing or art is quite interesting. Of course, there was a real catalyst and you remember this perfectly well because we were both in school at the University of Victoria in the same place where on one side of the hall was the music department and on the other side of the hall was the visual arts department. We had the best example of a multidisciplinary art school that existed at the time in Canada. Simon Fraser's School for the Contemporary Arts was not in operation at that point. I don't think York was. Cal Arts was barely starting. But here we were growing up with people who used a different sense. And these were people that we spent our days with and I cannot stress too much how important it is for somebody learning about creating something in one discipline, in our case music, to be in conversation for several years with people who are using their eyes to create things. And not only that, but also having a teacher in the form of Rudolf Komorous for whom the visual arts was an absolutely central concern. It was possible as a younger person to have conversations which moved literally between senses. So you were moving from language to music to visual art and this was just what you did. You grow up with something and then that becomes absolutely natural to you. When I went to school in the US at Stony Brook near New York City, I spent every possible moment of my time in New York City art galleries. Art galleries were free and concerts were quite expensive....

At the same time, I think there were conversations about languages and literature and at an early age I discovered the German Dada artist Kurt Schwitters through his *Ursonata*, through his sound poetry. But I'd also known Hugo Ball, Richard Huelsenbeck, and Tristan Tzara's sound poetry and performances. As time went on, it didn't occur to me that one should be separate about these things: they all inform each other and you can use the forms of visual art to help you create form in music because you can construe it as time in a certain way. Or it could have something to do with densities or shapes or you name it.

DZ: Certainly Hugo Ball and others, Kurt Schwitters' sound poetry, Dada, early 20th century—going back to the early part of our conversation it seems to me it was a successful revolution. Once having done the *Ursonata*, there was no taking that back.

CH: That's a great idea! Once something's been proposed there no way you can take it back. The only thing I would say to that is it's very hard to talk about currents in culture at all because they're operating at a level of complexity that we can only hazard a guess at. The *Ursonata* proposes a whole set of possibilities for performance, for language, for what poetry is, for what form is. Although as somebody once put it, the *Ursonata* is probably the most perfect example of sonata form ever written. But the crazy thing is that if it were a piece of music, we wouldn't know about it—it would be boring because it's so perfect. The sonata form becomes an organizing system that shapes nonsense into something that is heard, seen, felt—for me the *Ursonata* involves the entire sensorium.

DZ: Another way of thinking about the *Ursonata* is that, in its brilliant way, it demonstrates an incommensurable difference between language and music. What we call the sonata process in music is concerned with harmonic “territories” and memory. Here, even this amazing work of sound poetry can't follow. Perhaps an instance of the untranslatable, and something entirely new.

CB: Is it possible though that the best poetry delivers an affect equivalent to music, a way of expressing the ineffable—I've always stayed away from setting poetry to music, thinking that the best poetry contains quite enough music on its own. Richard Strauss set dreadful poetry to music, with extraordinary results, for example the song *Morgen*, op. 27 no. 4, in which he takes maudlin verse by John Henry Mackay and makes something extraordinary. But it's always been one of those ironies that the most memorable songs often have second-rate lyrics.

But back to *Ursonata*: a curious fact about Dada in art and poetry and writing is that what could have been a completely ephemeral entertainment and could have been a weird little blip on the radar instead becomes this very quiet bell that resonates louder and louder through the century. You could say that even though he never acknowledged himself as a member of Dada, Duchamp was the great guarantor of Dada, of that way of thinking about something which takes an absurd position and treats it very seriously. So these things that people at the time thought

would simply disappear without a trace continue to resonate. You can also say that the history of the 20th century is violent enough and absurd enough and out of control enough that it needs a complementary movement in art and that Dada is the perfect match because it just gives absurdity back to absurdity.

DZ: This is a great moment for me to circle back on that thought to talk about your interest in the rather obscure figure Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes: how you found him and why you decided to spend a couple of years reading his quite remarkable plays and then translating them towards publication, I think this year.

CH: Well again I don't admit to any originality. I was asked at the end of the 1970s by Rudolf Komorous, my composition teacher, if I would think of translating this opera called *The Emperor of China* by Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes—he was known as GRD—for a possible opera libretto. And I said sure. Rudolf had wanted to set Alfred Jarry's famous *Ubu Roi* from 1897 but he had heard that the Hungarian composer Ligeti had got there first. Rudolf wanted something like it. He had known this play of GRD's—it had been produced in Prague in the 1920s—and GRD had also written two little operas with the Czech composer Bohuslav Martinů. He knew that there was a French edition of the plays by Gallimard in Paris in 1966 and so he gave me this play, *The Emperor of China*, to translate. It took me some time. I must have finished it about 1980 or 81, and I showed it to Rudolf and he said thank you very much, he was interested to read it but he couldn't use it because he didn't know it was so violent. Because it is, it's extremely violent. It's also extremely funny. And here we're faced with the conditions for Dada: not violence in a kind of cinematic sense or even in a psychological sense, but more in a cultural sense, as a refutation of all established codes—to which there is attached a great deal of absurdity and humour. This is the interesting intersection of what I think the psychologists call "serious play." The whole thing is extremely playful but there is a serious impetus behind the project. So I translated the play and for all the years afterwards, from the early 1980s, I would look for references to GRD having been translated into English. Because you read about him everywhere—when you read about Duchamp and Picabia in Paris before and after the First World War, it's Duchamp, Picabia, and Ribemont-Dessaignes. Well, we know who Duchamp is. Picabia is considered absolutely central. But of GRD there isn't a word, not one word that is translated into English. So in the end it was serendipitous: I happened upon a publisher, the Wakefield Press in Cambridge MA. They've been going for

about four years, and they publish only the most obscure European authors who have never been translated before. I sent them *The Emperor of China* and said are you interested in this and they said well yes we are, we'd like to publish it but would you translate the other two plays in the book that was published by Gallimard, one of which was called *The Mute Canary*, which is just a one-act play and the other which is called *The Executioner of Peru* which if anything is even more vile and violent than *The Emperor of China*. So right now all sorts of things in my areas of interest are being satisfied.

Ribemont-Dessaignes wrote *The Emperor of China* in 1916 while he was working in the Defense College in Paris for the Ministry of War; he was in the family information section. Perhaps they were the people that sent out the letters saying so sorry your son has been killed. I'm not sure what his actual job was. But what I'm faced with in looking at a play like *The Emperor of China*, which is an absurdity from start to finish, is its gravity. That's what it's about. It's about gravity and things coming to rest, equilibrium. It's about the impossibility of control over these physical facts, about the simple fact of humans being subject to rules so far beyond their control that it's a wonder they exist at all. And what I'm trying to get to the bottom of still—because the First World War takes up a great deal of intellectual space in my brain—is how to look at reactions to the literal carnage that took place in the years between 1914 and 1918. We know about the Commonwealth experience of that war and individual Dominion experience of that war, but in fact the French experience was, it's possible to say, even more horrible. When you read accounts of experience at the front—there's the French equivalent of *All Quiet on the Western Front* called *Le Feu* by Henri Barbusse, I guess it could be translated *Under Fire*—you're struck by the complete resignation to absurdity of the soldiers in this incredibly chaotic and violent and filthy world. And in a way, *The Emperor of China* is a fair representation of this. He wrote the play in 1916 and it wasn't produced until 1925. After the war was over and Ribemont-Dessaignes was involved with Dada, with Duchamp, Picabia, and Tzara and with Soupault, René Crevel, and Benjamin Péret—they came later with the Surrealists, later in the 20s—I think his own sense was the most polemical. He was called the most vitriolic of the Dadaists. They were calling for the destruction of all kind of conventions and conceived ideas in art and so forth, but it was GRD who called for the destruction of the destruction. By the time GRD gets to *The Executioner of Peru* in the very

early 1920s, there is transgressive behaviour on the stage that is beyond any kind of nihilist playwriting you can think of. Sometimes I think it's no wonder the plays were never translated because they are sort of unbearable. And the place you look back to is the theatre of Jarry and the absurd world he created with *Ubu Roi* and with Dr. Faustroll and 'Pataphysics, "the science of imaginary solutions." I should qualify this discussion about the plays a little bit because what is very interesting in the production of **The Emperor of China** is that it is in no way a naturalistic presentation. It's actually done with paper puppets, two-dimensional figures that are moved around a very narrow stage from behind, so the violence is implicit. People are not plunging knives in people's backs, even though you're there and the blood is flowing. Even in the theatre, the Grand Guignol had already perfected this sort of stage business and I can't help but wonder if the Grand Guignol which is the Theatre of Horror, the famous Parisian Theatre of Horror, was an influence on them. It made it possible to think of these things taking place on a stage.

DZ: That was going to be one of my questions, Christopher, whether these plays are plays to be read or whether they are plays to be performed.

CH: There have been very few performances. There was a production in France about six or seven years ago of *The Emperor of China* in a provincial theatre, but with people not puppets. To my knowledge, *The Executioner of Peru* has had no recent productions. The plays were produced in Prague in the 1920s and in Rome as well; they had some acknowledgement, some life, but beyond that really nothing. The fact is, and I'm not a scholar of the theatre, but if I had to look for a link between Jarry and Artaud and the Theatre of Cruelty, the kind of direct confrontation of psychological and emotional states on the stage, I would have to say you guys forgot GRD, because his plays are a pivot that sends you forward again.

I should actually say a few words about Ribemont-Dessaignes himself. He was involved with the Surrealists as well. He fell out with Breton like everybody did; there was a correspondence between them in about 1929 where he simply says I can't take your doctrinaire approach. And trying to deal with communism and trying to sign everyone up to be communists—Ribemont felt there was absolutely no part to play in politics for the Surrealists whatsoever. And then in about 1934 he simply left town. As one biographical note put it, "He abruptly left town." And he went to run a hotel in the mountains of the Dauphinée, and apparently everybody

thought he was dead. He did some artwork later in life. He illustrated a book of poems by Jacques Prévert with whom he was very close—and whose words I've set to music as well.³ He doesn't seem to have had much interest in pursuing a career in public as a writer; books were published, he made a lot of radiophonic pieces for the French radio after 1949. Before the war he wrote novel treatments of movies, you know now you buy the DVD, then you bought the novel. These are kind of pulp, a pulp fiction. He is not a major figure. He's a fugitive figure, he's evasive. He avoids his place in history. I love this about GRD; you cannot put your finger on him. You go looking for his material in the archives and it's scattered all over the place and half the stuff is untraceable. There's a great cache of it in Ottawa, for God's sake. Why is it in Ottawa? Well because some academic in the beginning of the 1970s turned up and sold a great heap of material to the University of Ottawa. Who knew? So anyway, the plays are a wild, strange sort of literary and dramatic pivot. That's the whole Ribemont-Dessaignes thing in a nutshell.

DZ: Do you have last things that you would like to say concerning language, music, and translation?

CB: I think conceptually about what I'm going to compose. Music is not something that flows out of me on impulse; it's an arduous job to first come up with the idea, then to figure out how to render it as music. Which you could call a kind of translation. I start with something ineffable, and the hope that I can find a way to translate it into sound. Which will then be converted into sound by players. I don't have any clear explanation about the structures that I use—just that they're fairly simple, but lead to complex ends (more rewarding than the other way around!).

Which maybe is why I'm interested in the Ribemont-Dessaignes project. Why I have never stopped being interested in these particular things. And I think it has something to do with the fact that in translation of anything, you can never finally be sure what something means. I actually think that even in speaking between ourselves in the language that any two people share, there's more translation going on than we acknowledge. Language is a complex thing and much is hidden. If you hear somebody speaking you literally never know what's coming next, so your

3 *Contes pour enfants pas sages: 8 cautionary entertainments* composed by Christopher Butterfield on stories by Jacques Prévert. Tenor and soprano solo, 12 voices SATB, flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano, percussion, tenor sax, mandolin.

brain is always making up meanings in advance. It's trying to anticipate where something is going. Translation is really a kind of prediction of something that you think is going to happen and maybe it happens a little more easily in the language you're fluent in than in the language the other person is fluent in. In a language that is not your own, and French is not my own language and I'm not fluent in French, I can translate and I can imagine what it is trying to say. But finally, it's a speculation. And I would actually say that anything that I do, anything that I write, anything that I make, can only be that. It can only be a speculation that is received by somebody who will then have to assess what it means for them. And with luck they will find it interesting. So the whole thing is a speculation which is a translation. Or vice versa, a translation which is a speculation. But that's what I like about these plays. It's that they're simultaneously rational, logical, absurd, funny, tender, violent, and it's the combination of these you're going to walk away remembering.