

EN | SERGE VERSTOCKT and his contemporary-music ensemble **CHAMPDACTION** present *HRZSCHMRZ*, a “trash opera” about love, featuring, among others, Guido Belcanto, a megaphone choir, and singing avatars. It will undoubtedly be one of the highlights of the **KLARAFESTIVAL**, which is setting out to shed new light on love under the motto, “If love could be”. **ROEL DAENEN**

ChampdAction’s home base is deep in the bowels of deSingel in Antwerp. When we pay Serge Verstockt a visit there, two weeks ahead of the premiere, the creative process is still fermenting and bubbling away. Exhilarated and happy, he leads us to a model of the stage. “It is always really exciting, these last few weeks. All the pieces of the puzzle have got to fall into place now,” he says, laughing. And adds in the same breath: “And there are still quite a few of them.” Verstockt has had a lot of experience, so surely he must be confident of a successful outcome. “Confident? Yes and no. It’s true, I’ve been working with this team for a long time now: we know what to expect from each other. As for my working methods, however, I believe strongly that I have to question myself, again and again, every time. Otherwise, I’m simply fated to disappear! I believe that, as a composer, you have to ask yourself what position you take up in this world. What do you have to say? And why is it relevant? As an artist, you have to constantly push yourself out of your comfort zone! Contemporary-music festivals like Ars Musica have become much smaller than before or have simply disappeared. Now, you could say, ‘It’s the fault of the media’, or of the public, or just everyone’s fault! [Sarcastically] But, hey, it couldn’t be the composer’s fault, could it? Look into your own heart first.”



OK, so do you do that sometimes?

SERGE VERSTOCKT: Before, you used to have the big established names of contemporary music: Stockhausen, Nono, Boulez, and so on. Now, most of those big names are dead and gone. That is history, heritage. And that’s the way we need to see things today. Modernism may have been answered by postmodernism, which started with John Cage. But I often wonder whether postmodern music wasn’t just

the forerunner of something much bigger. When you see how huge the impact of the Internet is...time and space hardly matter any more: everything is immediately copied and transformed. It’s that very assessment that was the starting point for *HRZSCHMRZ* for me. How is “love” getting on in these digital times? To come back to your question: as an artist, I want, first and foremost, to get an idea across, and not just to get people to listen to some

THE FOOD OF LOVE



notes. I have no interest at all in making something that would only be intelligible to a bunch of the initiated.

Let's talk about HRZSCHMRZ. I don't get the impression that "love" is a very popular theme for composers today.

VERSTOCKT: That's true: it's almost not done. Writing a love song as a contemporary composer? Out of the question! The Klarafestival asked me to do something on that theme - and I'm grateful to them!

Very soon, I came across the phenomenon of the Japanese *hikikomori*. That is a large group of young people between the ages of 15 and 30, who shut themselves up in their rooms and completely withdraw from society. Their "lives" take place entirely on the Internet! For example, they get married to manga figures - characters in a comic strip! They quite deliberately choose virtual partners. So long as we use the Internet for practical things or for content - looking up information on Wikipedia, ordering tickets, planning a journey - that's all fine, we reckon. But once it's about love and libido... If those people find what they're looking for in cyberspace, people find that weird. I make a connection between those *hikikomori* and medieval European nuns. They also lived their lives in complete seclusion and were said to have married a virtual figure - Jesus. [Grins] And I also rooted around in music history - and finally ended up with none other than Buddy Holly! A real man, of flesh and blood!

How's that?

VERSTOCKT: He marked the beginning of real rock 'n' roll. [Sings, with conviction] "Heartbeat, why do you stop when my baby's kissing me?" That really is about body and soul. And musically, certainly in his later period, it's quite simply punk ahead of its time! But he is just one of the names from music history. *HRZSCHMRZ* has many layers. Another example? Obviously, I couldn't ignore Schubert. But I don't have such a great affinity with his work. We have included him the way the metal band Rammstein would do it. [Laughs]

Hence the label "trash opera"?

VERSTOCKT: I think it's good to tinker with the codes of classical music and opera, and to do things that nobody expects. ChampdAction is a small outfit and we have very limited resources. But that does give us the trigger to be creative. By keeping it trashy, we can do that! So we are

working with singing avatars, there is a megaphone choir, and we also make considerable use of projections.

And the crooner Guido Belcanto is cast as a "troubadour".

VERSTOCKT: Guido Belcanto is someone really special - he is one of a kind! As a performer, he kind of fluctuates between reality and fiction. That makes him a great fit for this production, which also seeks out the intersection between the virtual and the real world. He describes himself as the troubadour, who tells the story. For there is actually a story, the tale of a knight. In which a knight falls in love with his queen. [Eagerly] Of course,

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the king discovers their mutual love and immediately sends his knight off to the crusades. Before he leaves, the queen makes him promise that, if he dies, he will have his heart sent to her. And of course he dies! His page obeys his dead master, cuts the heart out of his body and travels home with it. The king intercepts the heart and gives it to his cook, with instructions to make a stew with it. And you can figure out the rest for yourself! The queen sits down, tastes it, and says, "This is really the most delicious stew I have ever eaten!" When the king tells her what she has eaten, her lover's heart, she immediately dies. End of story. Blood-curling, eh? **A**

📍 **HRZSCHMRZ, 17/3, 20.00, €20, Ancienne Belgique**

NL De overtreffende trap van hybride, shoppend uit alle mogelijke media en dragers: zo zou je het werk van componist-regisseur Serge Verstockt van productiehuis ChampdAction kunnen omschrijven. Op vraag van het Klarafestival, dat in het teken van de liefde staat, schreef hij *HRZSCHMRZ*, een "grote trashopera" over de liefde.

FRI Hybride au plus haut degré, puisant dans tous les médias et les supports possibles: ainsi pourrait-on qualifier l'œuvre du compositeur Serge Verstockt, de la plate-forme ChampdAction. À la demande du Klarafestival, placée cette année sous le signe de la passion, il a écrit *HRZSCHMRZ*, un «grand opéra trash» sur l'amour.



KLARAFESTIVAL • 6 > 21/3, festival pass: €99, VERSCHILLENDE LOCATIES/DIVERS LIEUX/VARIOUS LOCATIONS, 070-21.02.17, www.klarafestival.be