



Skalpel: *Kohelet* – *Illuminations*

15 November (Friday) — 10.00 pm

Mała Warszawa
14 Otwocka Street

Recordings of early-music songs about passing and eternal life performed by Monodia Polska became a source of inspiration for the Skalpel duo, as well as material for further transformations. This procedure can be compared to the illumination of historic buildings, which brings out shape nuances unknown to their creators. This time, electronic music will illuminate early-music Kohelet songs, their melodies and lyrics, respecting the original sounds, yet desiring to extract from them previously unheard contours and tropes. The Skalpel duo is great at it.

Concert programme

Electronic interpretations of psalms
by Mikołaj Gomółka and of Polish songs
from the repertoire of Adam Strug
and Monodia Polska

Performers:

Skalpel:
Igor Pudło
Marcin Cichy

Skalpel: *Kohelet – Illuminations*

Do No Harm

It all started in June, when the *Eufonie – Preludium* concert took place. The Column Hall of the Faculty of History of the University of Warsaw witnessed a performance of anonymous court and folk songs and chants of wandering beggars, spanning from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, as well as psalms by Mikołaj Gomółka translated by Jan Kochanowski. These songs share the themes of earthly transience, eschatology or faith in eternal life. The concert was a huge success, Adam Strug and Monodia Polska sang excellently, and this is where the story could end. But not this time. The concert was registered, which gives the recorded music a second life as an inspiration to create contemporary electronic music.

Transforming early-music songs? Folk purists protect traditional songs against such procedures, shielding their unique character from musical temporariness. On the other hand, the other part of this community is not afraid of transformations. From versions close to pop music (some will say too close) to artistic arrangements in which early-music songs – combined with influences from various traditions of world music with the help of today's sensitivity – constitute a new, contemporary quality. But electronics? Some listeners may remember Enigma's albums from over thirty years ago and the subsequent wave of shallow recordings mixing chants of quasi-monks with uniform beats. The anxiety about compiling music that – according to purists – does not require any changes with modern electronics is therefore understandable. In this case, however, the audience does not need to worry, because it is the Skalpel duo, that is Igor Pudło and Marcin Cichy, that was invited to a creative meeting with early-music songs.

Skalpel's oeuvre is largely associated with a journey into the musical past. It all started with recordings of Polish jazz from the 1960s and translating them into the language of samples, loops, mixes and transformations. Over time, it turned out that this language is also very well suited for a new interpretation of masters of classical music: Krzysztof Penderecki, Wojciech Kilar, Henryk Mikołaj Górecki or Witold Lutosławski. Skalpel's dialogues have always proven to be a conversation with music, but also with the recordings of this music. This issue is worth emphasising, because for some listeners, the terms music and recording mean the same thing. Meanwhile, they are closely related, but not identical. The recording can be regarded as matter: one can cut it, slow down, reverse, accelerate, combine, loop, filter frequencies or add studio effects. The music contained in the recording remains present in it, but at the same time, it changes with each subsequent transformation.

This time, Skalpel goes deeper than before. It dialogues with the Monodia Polska ensemble, and thanks to the recording of the performed pieces – with early Polish music itself. To describe the way of listening, reading and transforming these influences, Skalpel's musicians use a nice metaphor: cathedral builders did not know that one day it would be possible to watch their creations at night, illuminated by electric light, which would bring out unexpected chiaroscuro effects, thus drawing new forms and shapes of old walls. 'We want to illuminate this acoustic music performed by the Monodia Polska ensemble with the electric light of electronic music',¹ recalls Igor Pudło. Let us try to understand this metaphor. The starting point is the songs themselves. Melodies, scales, rhythms, Kohelet lyrics and coherent contents inspire the creation of new music by Skalpel, written for electronic instruments. On the other hand, we have the recording: matter that can become the cornerstone of a composition, a brick of a sound cathedral, a figure framed by electronic sounds. Like a motif that will be heard against an ambient background, amid the static sounds of profound drones, in a new harmonic setting. Lyrics can also serve as a source of inspiration, carefully chosen and woven into the musical narrative. One can extract individual words, and one may also be interested in the very sound of sung syllables and resonant vowels and consonants carrying the meaning, as in the elongated syllables of medieval chants. Finally, there is the atmosphere of a concert recording: the sound of the hall, reverberations and everything that can be heard between the performed pieces, including announcements, supposedly secondary, yet often important, whose sound is as important as the sound of singing. In Skalpel's composition inspired by Penderecki's string quartet, the procedure of weaving the composer's voice into the sound layers worked perfectly.

Will the words by Adam Strug, who presented subsequent songs building the atmosphere of the June encounter, inspire the Skalpel musicians? Will the duo include them into the musical tissue? I will be honest: I do not know. It is likely. We have talked to the creators about this music, but I have not heard it yet, as it was too early – it was still being created. I am in the same place as you who are reading these words before the concert: I am eagerly looking forward to it.

Transforming early-music songs makes sense only if they are reinterpreted by artists who are sensitive, inquisitive and, above all, respectful of the musical past. The achievements of the Skalpel ensemble show that the duo combines this respect for other people's music with the ability to take a fresh look at old sounds and to build their own stories on the basis thereof. Igor Pudło says: 'We know how to handle such music so as not to harm it. We want it to be beautiful.'² I believe him.

Mariusz Gradowski

¹ Igor Pudło in a telephone conversation with Mariusz Gradowski, 16.07.2024.

² Ibid.



Skalpel

For years, the Wrocław-based Skalpel duo (Marcin Cichy and Igor Pudło) has been combining the local jazz tradition with the possibilities of new electronics. The ensemble stands out due to its unique style – the musicians creatively decontextualise small fragments and sound snippets from works by other artists to then assemble them in new sequences. This leads to the development of new rhythmic, melodic and textural relations between the used fragments,

while the resulting musical narrative is close to the poetics of collage. The duo's first two albums – *Skalpel* (2004) and *Konfusion* (2005) – recorded for the famous Ninja Tune label, were followed by concerts all over the world and excellent reviews in prestigious music magazines, from *NME*, to *Pitchfork*, *The Wire*, and *DJ Magazine*. These albums are now among the classics of jazztronics, while the next ones – *Transit* (2014), *Highlight* (2020) and *Origins* (2022) – are an excellent

update and modification of Skalpel's unique analogue-digital sound. These latest albums have been released worldwide in cooperation with the iconic record label !K7 Records, working with, among others, Tosca and Tricky. Skalpel has won such awards as Fryderyk, the Polityka Passport Award, the Man with the Golden Ear Award or the Wrocław Artistic Award. The duo has also been nominated for the BBC Gilles Peterson Award.

