

# Anette Röde

## Silent

*"Maybe he would like to hear a song, Mummy?" So we sang: all the children's songs that we knew; the same songs that he had sung with me, thousands and thousands of times, come rain, come shine, out of happiness or to quietly put me to bed.*

"You were completely silent. The whole of your first year at school you didn't say a word. Your schoolmistress didn't even know that you could read." My mother told me this as a kind of funny story, even if it was a little odd. She laughed, but was insecure in her amusement. I no longer recall my silence. It was just there; it had apparently become a part of me.

I loved it! One day a week around twenty small children gathered in the church to rehearse the songs that were going to be sung on Sunday during Mass. We did not know each other; we never met otherwise. But there, every week, we went through the same ritual together and, in general, also the same songs. These songs were like small rooms into which we entered. Rooms of notes, patterns, colours, moods that I came to know so well: the smell of the stone floor; the sun that shone through the small stained glass windows towards heaven; the serious countenance of Mary, Holy Mother of God, and of Child Jesus himself. That room became my home. Little, croaky children's voices united into one. The tones spread out in the church, mixed themselves into a babble of praise that rose to the ceiling, to heaven and home, to God the Father, as He sat on his great throne of gold, with a beard, kind eyes and massive hands. Sometimes He fell quietly asleep for a while and sometimes He became jolly. Then I knew that the next day would be sunny.

Who am I?  
What am I saying?  
To whom am I saying it and why?

To sing is to be in paradise. To perform is to do balancing acts in hell. You balance on a fine thread and spend all the time there to find the song inside you and communicate it: an act of love.

What are you going to choose and what are you going to become? If you do not choose you might be one of those

who will be left out. An outsider; high school; fierce competition; statistics: what are you going to be when you grow up? Are you going to be like your father and mother? Evaluations, assessments, investigations, climb upwards past those whom nothing can help, those who will never survive, past the blondes who chew gum and are buried alive in the suburbs.

Perfectionism? Are you stupid or? The singing teacher! The singing teacher placed me in front of a full length mirror every lesson. There I stood studying my own diaphragm and pretending to look as though I knew how to make the voice resonate fully. "Tummy in, tongue out, a little laugh can never hurt and RELAX (tummy in). This is fun! Don't look so boring! Down with the cheeks, out with the tongue, up with your breasts. There! That's it! Perfect!" Finally out came one beautifully made perfect tone. One. Beautiful. Tone.

Get drunk, cut your own skin, fall into the fire, forget to get out, become paralysed in both arms. Comb your hair, brush your teeth, watch the clock and do your homework. Watch out for what is dangerous, do not look over the edge, look at that pretty little porcelain bird and watch out, dance away, find the right notes, collect yourself, pull yourself together, work, sing, singing work, search, look, do not be so ugly, do not look so boring. Sound wonderful and practise another scale until it's right. It sounds so good when you sing right.

No, I gave up. The classical singing lessons became lessons in playing with Barbie dolls and happy, newly polished, laughter. I became silent again and did not sing for many years.

Who are you - not who do you want to look like?

What are you saying - not what do you want it to sound like?

To whom are you saying it - do it for everyone.

Why - give nuances and vitality.

He was a great actor. People came from far away to see him on stage and they always had a powerful experience. In his last years he revealed the secret behind the mystery and his great presence. Before each performance he tucked a coin in between his buttocks and used all his strength to keep it in place.

The memory of the red rehearsal room is the strongest: the smell of centuries that came towards us, the red plush chairs that creaked; the grand piano; the sound of bare feet against the floor. There were twenty-five of us; twenty-five islands moving around in sweat and concentration or in our own bubbles. Sometimes, a meeting; a liberation or a punishment, depending. At the beginning anything came: vomit, a song, an old, forgotten memory. After a while we mastered the tools, the craft. I also had my own music room in the little library. They came there and stood in front of me. At the beginning I was paralysed by their trust. I often started by asking them to sing in an uglier way, shake off their polish, which inhibited them. All the trembling attempts to reach the right notes only took them further away from that possibility. When I could trick them into thinking about something else, concentrate on something simple, they threw themselves into it. And the great moments occurred. Absolute. Presence. Human.

The first time I heard her sing was on an old cassette player. It whined and croaked and one could only hear her voice, low, far away. She did not hit one note and the beautiful piano playing that dominated the foreground killed every attempt at song. But

it was amongst the most beautiful voices I have heard.

Some weeks later she stood in front of me, blinding me, lighting cigarette after cigarette. Her eyes darted from heaven and sideways in her quest. When her eyes met mine she was present: "I want to sing this tango, can you teach me?" She demanded rather than asked, and I was happy.

Every tone she sang contained an arsenal of expressions that was impossible to resist. She overwhelmed me with complete madness on the occasions I managed to take her away from the obligation to deliver.

Afterwards she always looked up at me through her tangled hair. She looked like a worried little girl asking anxiously if it was wrong. I was often speechless. She knocked me out every time. She had found the entrance. She had access to her own history and she had also found its expression, the way to us - the listeners. Together she and I had entered the room where anything was allowed to happen and it did. Hand in hand we stumbled forwards, mostly in the dark, but paying attention to each other without prejudice. Three years later we began the real work on intonation.

My father did not have long left. He was floating in a kind of fog, and the usual alert, friendly blue gaze had become water. He no longer recognised me. He no longer owned a language. There he sat, my beloved father, with his arms hanging limply by his sides, alone among other wordless souls.

I had not visited him for a long time, and I understood that it was too late for everything. On this particular day, my six year old daughter and I took him outside into the sun. His transparent skin sucked up the sun rays, but his eyes remained water. At first I spoke quickly and animatedly about nothing, but after a while I fell silent. He did not understand any longer, he was

not there. The little one asked some questions about her granddad in a serious whisper.

We took his hands carefully and stroked them quietly. They had become little bird's feet, stone like. His skin licked the sun, but his gaze stayed on the horizon. He was a beloved skeleton.

"Maybe he would like to hear a song, Mummy?" So we sang: all the children's songs that we knew; the same songs that he had sung with me, thousands and thousands of times, come rain, come shine, out of happiness or to quietly put me to bed. Then it happened. Dad awoke. He was there and he saw us both. His eyes cracked open in sun and happiness, and they welcomed us, but as if we had always been there. He slowly leaned his head back and enjoyed the sun, the heat and the smell of the summer flowers. After some minutes he fell asleep, whilst laughing. Slowly he retreated into his own fog again. A week later he was dead.

Translated from Swedish by Geddy Aniksdal

ANETTE RÖDE HAGNELL (Sweden/Norway) was born in 1966 and educated as a classical musician in Stockholm. She joined Institutet för Scenkonst in 1989 to work with the actors on voice and as a theatre musician. She is now living in Norway where she has worked for fifteen years with Grenland Friteater as a musician, voice pedagogue and actress.