

## Daniela Debald

# Uncharted Territory

### LOST TEETH AND SECRET TUNES

As a child I sang a lot. I remember moments like these: singing behind the window pane with more and more raindrops falling and rolling down on it, or humming in the back of the car watching the meadows and trees or houses passing by. I improvised melodies. My singing then was very soft and gentle. It tried to join the sounds around me, the falling rain, the purring of the car. I did not want to be heard. Too intimate, too vulnerable were these fragile little lines of music. That is how I remember my own singing as a child.

Some weeks ago I found an audio-cassette with recordings of my brother and myself that I had made when I was about five. It is also an improvised song. Obviously trying to tease my younger brother by being louder than him, I sing: "I have just lost a tooth, falleri fallera". Little hiccups of laughter interrupt my loud voice because I am finding it so very, very funny to sing like that and drown my brother out.

### MUTE

Later, singing somehow turned into a serious matter, into something one was either able to do or not. Obviously I belonged to those who were unable to sing. Singing was limited to certain places. There were some hymns I liked very much, but the melodies were played at a very high pitch. To reach the notes I would have had to sing very loudly, which I did not dare.

Singing at school was one of the most embarrassing experiences in my life. Our music teacher liked to sit behind a black grand piano, playing the melody of a song and then asking one of us to sing - to stand up and sing alone, only accompanied by the piano, in front of the rest of the class. The relief of those who had not been chosen on this occasion expressed itself in foolish, nervous giggling that made things even harder for the person singing. My voice then groped from note to note, hardly audible; it felt as if I were naked.

*One person has passed  
it onto another.  
I have learnt it myself,  
I will teach it to others.  
I sing it and others hear me.  
In singing the song,  
I become part of a chain that  
is linked by the song.  
I had discovered tradition in  
its literal sense.*

I greatly admired a girl who had a beautiful voice, who was a little older than me. She often sang on school occasions, and everybody in the audience was carried away by her pure, crystal clear soprano. In a way she embodied what singing meant to me at that time, and I think also for those around me. She *could* sing, she was a very talented soprano, the embodied ideal of a young female singer, using a very high, head resonator, when she sang her *Kunstlieder*<sup>1</sup>.

Singing was not natural, not spontaneous or carefree - it was art and could be performed only by talented and trained singers. The only place where the rest of us could sing aloud was at the disco or the carnival, where the music was even louder so we would be croaking the next morning without even having been able to hear our own voices. Nevertheless I longed to sing.

One of my daydreams was to stand up in an assembly of people and to start to sing in a beautiful voice. On another cassette that I found, I can be heard singing at the age of sixteen: "The answer is blowing in the wind..." - an attempt to hear myself, to find myself, to judge myself with the help of the mirror that this little tape was intended to be.

## SPEECHLESS

When I was nineteen years old I worked with STUDIO 7 for the first time. Later this would become the theatre group I would join and with which I still work. It was a three-week-workshop and if I had known in advance that we were going to sing I would probably never have taken part. What happened there turned my world upside down.

While I had been convinced by former

experiences that you could do things either right or wrong, I now learnt that you could do things in many different ways and experience the new possibilities that open up in the process. 'Right' or 'wrong' did not interest anyone in this work-space; these categories simply did not exist. The situation was completely different from what I had experienced at school: we learnt the songs slowly and line-by-line so that everybody could follow. We had time to find our way into the tune. We always sang in a group and our voices together had a strong and beautiful sound that carried every one of us along. And we learned songs from other countries that were sung with a deeper resonator. I did not have to try to reach those very high notes anymore; nobody expected me to become a crystal clear soprano. I could explore my own voice and it has been a very long, joyful, and exciting discovery ever since, and one that still continues.

## TRAVELLING TO UNCHARTED TERRITORY

Since then singing has become an essential part of my life and many songs have accompanied me. There has been so much uncharted territory on the landscape of my voice to which I have travelled time after time, and very often a song has been my vehicle. The special quality of songs from other cultures helped me to explore my voice. I could abandon the ideal of the high female voice and discover that my own voice could sound very deep and strong.

I understood that it was not the virtuoso beauty of the voice for which I was looking, but rather a certain quality in the singing that I can hardly express in words; something that could flow into a song while

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1. Composed songs: the melody arrangements are often very demanding and thus difficult for untrained singers to sing. The tradition of the German *Kunstlied* is very strong and has partly displaced the original culture of folk music.



Jürgen Skrambraks and Daniela Debald in *Cantu 'nu cantu*. Photo: Christoph Falke

singing, something that could be communicated or perhaps be revealed by singing.

Ten years after I left school, I found myself on stage in a programme of traditional songs from many different countries. We had called it *Cantu 'nu cantu* which is a phrase from a Corsican song meaning "I sing a song". I realised that the song is another being with which you can have a dialogue. The song carries something in itself. It might be a resonant quality that might lead you to areas of your voice that you have not experienced before. Its melody

carries a certain mood, a specific colour. It tells a story. It has a history. Other people have sung it at other times. It originates from a certain culture. One person has passed it onto another. I have learnt it myself, I will teach it to others. I sing it and others hear me. In singing the song, I become part of a chain that is linked by the song. I had discovered tradition in its literal sense. But again there was uncharted territory.

One evening after a concert, someone in the audience asked us why we had not



Daniela Debald. Photo: Christoph Falke

sung a single German song. I was surprised. Indeed we had collected songs from many European countries, from Africa and South America. But we did not have one traditional song from Germany.

### FLASHBACK

Italy 1995: we performed *Alto Solo*, a piece dealing with human beings living in a totalitarian system. This was inspired by Antoine Volodine's novel of the same name. In the book the story is set in an un-named country somewhere, there are no historical references. We had adopted this setting.

We had chosen a Hungarian march, learned from a Hungarian colleague some time before, as the battle song of the military regime. This was what the brutal

"frondists" (as they were called in the novel) sang when raiding a classical concert, driving people together and humiliating the artists publicly by forcing them to perform silly and brutal circus numbers.

A theatre teacher, who saw the performance and whose criticism we respected a lot, asked why we had not chosen German songs from the Nazi-Regime in order to confront the subject within our own culture. Indeed at the very beginning of rehearsals, which started as a workshop with a group of young students, we had been working on a Nazi war song, which also had been used by the National Socialist youth organizations. While singing it our task was to march around the rehearsal room and look for our physical response to the rhythm and melody of the song. *Es zittern die morschen Knochen der Welt vor dem großen Krieg (...) Denn heute gehört uns Deutschland und morgen die ganze Welt.* (The world's rotten bones are shivering in fear of the big war. Today Germany belongs to us; tomorrow the whole world will be ours.)

Indeed the rhythm and melody of the song started to have a certain impact on us, marching became easy, the movements became dance-like, a dance of stamping feet, of drumming arms. It was awful. We felt our physical reaction to the music but at the same time we heard the text - bones, war, today Germany, and tomorrow the whole world. There was such a discrepancy between our strong physical experience of and involvement in this march, and the horrifying images of the consequences of this ideology we experienced in front of our inner eyes. We started to giggle and mock. We could not stand it.

For many Germans the question of what one would have done in the Third Reich remains very present. Many people's parents or grandparents were involved in the Third

Reich, either as Party Members, soldiers, members of the Waffen-SS, or as members of the youth organisations, as followers of the National Socialist ideology etc. Would we ourselves have marched and celebrated Hitler as they did? We stopped working on this song. We avoided deep confrontation with our own history, our own roots. With the Hungarian march we chose an easier way.

### DARK SHADOWS

A German proverb says: "*Wo man singt, da lass dich nieder. Böse Menschen kennen keine Lieder.*" (Settle down where people sing. Bad folk do not know any songs.) It seems that the shocking realisation that singing is not innocent, and that song and culture can be abused, has left deep traces in German culture. Because the Nazis appropriated German folk music and folk traditions for their adulation of a 'Nordic, Germanic, Aryan' culture, folk songs today still have a bad reputation in Germany. When I travelled to other countries, I was surprised to find people gathering at festivals and just starting to sing their own songs for hours. I had never experienced that in Germany.

For some months now my grandmother has been in a nursing home. When I visit her on Wednesdays there is a group of old ladies sitting around a table. They sing old German folk songs with a lot of joy. Sometimes I know the first line from somewhere, sometimes the refrain. They sing along in their old voices. When they were young they must have sung a lot. It seems to be natural to them. In 1933 they were teenagers. They learnt to sing these songs before the Nazi regime came to power. In the evening of their lives they remember

how they used to be by singing these songs.

I watch the old ladies, I see myself as a child improvising songs, and a little later at school failing in my attempt to fulfil the expected ideal of a singer. I think of myself marching around our rehearsal room. I listen to the tapes and to my own sixteen-year-old voice groping with the question of who I am - "the answer is blowing in the wind".

As an actress I know I can find the right questions for this answer only in my work. I have started to collect German folk songs. I am trying to fill the holes in my research. I understand that looking for my cultural roots is not a romantic experience; that it must include all of history: the German folk song tradition and the dark shadows that are cast upon it. I see so much uncharted territory, which guides me in my attempt to shed light on the black shadows in the history of my culture.

DANIELA DEBALD (Germany) was born in 1974. She is an actress and singer. Since 1994 she has worked with STUDIO 7 in Köln. She has performed in almost all STUDIO 7 productions since then, including the concert programmes *Cantu 'nu cantu* and *Bilbilicos - Songs of the Sephardim*. She has completed an MA in Performance Studies, Philosophy and Education and is currently doing research work in the field of psychophysical processes in performance.