MORDACIOUS LIPS, TO DUST

for four singers
Pia Palme 2015

dedicated to

EXAUDI

Pia Palme

MORDACIOUS LIPS, TO DUST (2014-15)

A work for four singers
Performers: soprano, countertenor, tenor, bass

Text by Pia Palme

Composed for EXAUDI as part of the SAM Sound and Music Portfolio Project.

Comments

Performance instructions

The entire piece should be performed with a succinct expressiveness, simply and never exaggerated. The emotional directions should be followed with affective precision and a deep but contained intensity, resulting in a timbral shading of the voice performance from within, but not in dramatic agitation.

The piece has two movements, part 1 and part 2; part 2 follows immediately.

Part 1

The soprano
The soprano is framed as a solo performer contrasting the male voices, both vocally and regarding the emotional timbre. The soprano is asked to switch between two voice-personalities, soprano S and S2. They are notated on two separate staves, to de-couple the emotional directions and respective performance instructions.

Soprano S is notated on a five-line stave on top and is performed with a singing voice. The voice-personality is characterised by an affect of *gentle and with longing*.

Soprano S2 represents a strongly irate yet contained state of wrath described as *wrathful and menacing*. An array of noisy vocal productions is notated on a two-line stave below soprano S.

The two personalities should be shaped with a constant affective precision and intensity throughout part 1.

The male trio
The male voices form a trio environment set apart from the soloist. Text recitations continue to interrupt other vocal productions ranging from unvoiced sounds to singing. An affective state of *industrious and tireless* is consistently maintained throughout part 1.

Part 2

In part 2, all voices unite to perform as a quartet. The soprano is reduced to a single voice/stave S. The affective states of the performers merge to form a coherent group, and noisy productions are injected into all voices.

## Notation and affective specification

In addition to ordinary notation, different types of note-heads frame *affective* ranges for timbral sculpting.

Ordinary note-heads: singing voice.
Coloured with various emotional timbres as specified.
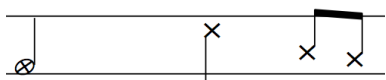
Crossed note-heads: noisy voice,
vocal productions, such as speaking, murmuring or whispering,
with a relatively defined pitch or formant colour
within the respective range.
Various emotional timbres as specified.
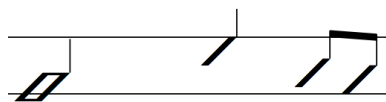
Slashed note-heads: irate voice,
vocal productions with a relatively defined pitch or formant colour and
with a constant, distinct timbre of a highly intense but controlled wrathfulness.

Notation of relatively defined pitch, and equalising through formants

Noisy (voiced or unvoiced) vocal sounds are notated on a two-line stave. The performance mode is detailed above. The two lines frame the *relative range* of the vocal register for the respective performance mode, from *as high as possible* to *as low as possible*. This includes various spoken, murmured or whispered and irate sounds.

For unvoiced productions such as whispering, the range denotes a *relative timbral colouring,* i. e. equalising of frequencies, of the audible airstream through formants, from *very dark* to *very high.*

Precise formants for voiced or unvoiced productions are specified in italics in a second lyrics-line below the first text line.

All specifications of noisy productions, such as distorted, snarling or growling, ask the performer to find a way of performance which results in the indicated aural and emotional timbre, while working best for his/her individual voice.

Text recitation

Longer passages of text written underneath an empty two-stave line should be recited individually, following a natural rhythm and an ordinary flow of speech. The manner of recitation is defined, specifying relative pitch if necessary (for example in bars 121 - 124 for all singers, or in the male voices from bar 1).
The total duration of a text recitation is indicated by cue-sized notes with dotted ties, above the bars:
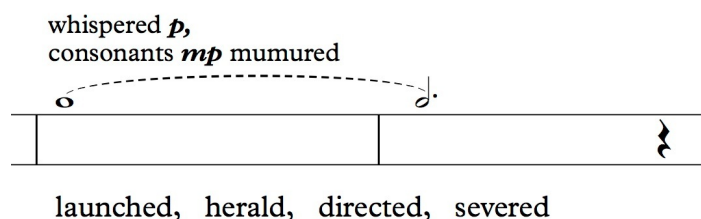
The text should always be spaced out evenly over the given time; the tempo of the recitation should be adapted by the performer. For the male voices in part 1, it is possible to leave out or repeat words if necessary to manage individual timing.

Dynamics

Dynamics are to be considered as relative; **mp** and **mf** indicate the middle dynamic levels of a given vocal production.
For unvoiced productions such as *whispering* or *hissing*, dynamics refer to the intensity and strength of the stream of breath, resulting in a relative noise level.
Different relative markings appear for example in the soprano, bar 5 for accented whispering, half-voiced pronunciation followed by singing in bar 6, or in the tenor bar 43 for singing and whispering.

Timing

Bars serve only as a means for synchronisation. Crotchets represent seconds in part 1 and a more flexible timing unit in part 2.

Glissando

A glissando is indicated by a line between end notes; it is smooth and without articulation in between. Stemlets indicate duration only, unless marked with staccato, as in soprano bar 69.
Glissando can also mark a continuous change of formant-colouring for unvoiced sounds, as in tenor bar 21.

Ornaments

Trills and mordents in the soprano part should be executed on the beat and with a minimal accent on the first note (similar to a Baroque manner). These ornaments are notated in a Baroque style because of their function as subtle singularities in the flow of singing: they are meant to accent, highlight and attract attention.
Always trill with the upper neighbouring note starting from the notated pitch, if not specified otherwise. The mordent is a single rapid alternation with the lower neighbouring note, if not specified explicitly.

Vibrato

Specific vibrato should be performed as natural as possible, following the instructions.

Grace notes

All grace notes are to be placed before the beat.

Pronunciation

The following characters are used to denote pronunciation.
The length of a sound is always determined by the note value.

a	as in f**a**ther
ç	as in German '**ich**'
θ	as in **th**in (unvoiced)
ð	as in **th**e (voiced)
e	as in dr**e**ss
ə	as in **a**go
o	as in **o**bey
œ	as in French '**peur**'
ʃ	as in **sh**e
tʃ	as in **ch**in
u	as in d**o**
ʉ	between y and u
ɨ	as in ros**e**s, between i and ə
y	as in French '**su**d' or '**su**r'
ʒ	as in vi**s**ion
t', d'	consonant with aspiration, with an unvoiced breathy release

Specific German words in IPA rendering:

ich	iç
Asche	ˈaʃə
St**au**b	ʃtaʊ̯p (**au** as in t**ow**er)

Special signs

•	unvoiced
ₒ	half-voiced, mixed with air/breath
○	unvoiced
⨁	with closed lips
⟶	gradual, smooth transition without interruption
✋	mute mouth with hand held in front, cupped and barely touching the mouth
tr〰	trill, as above
⩗	mordent, as above
//	short caesura, pause for 1 - 2 seconds

Text Soprano

Ich denke also bist
du
bin ich
hier
bricht
gedacht
bin ich gedacht
du gedacht

Scherben
Licht
scharfkantig reisst Raum
   ich dort
   und ihr
   drinnen
   draussen
   zwischen
   ein Fühlen
innen halten

 Halt!

aussen sehnt sich

 sticht

sehnt sich nach Liebe
Rose mit Dornen
trifft die Fingerspitzen
sehnt

Rose reisst Raum
in die Wirklichkeit
   mit Scherben
   mit Dornen
   mit Zerstörung
   mit Liebe
   mit Wahnsinn
Löcher in mein Lied
lockt Blut in den Schnee
barfuss auf einer Wiese

meine Schönheit
   ist Wort
   ist Lied
   ist Staub
   ist Asche

am Ende
unser aller
Ende
   ist Staub

PIA PALME 2014/2015

The text for the male voices

is a collage composed of English verbs, found in selected editions of the 'The New York Times International Weekly' during the period of composing. The verbs were excerpted from articles spanning a wide array of themes, and their grammatical appearance was left unchanged.

MORDACIOUS LIPS, TO DUST

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Part 1

♩=60

Soprano — *sung, gentle and with longing* — *pppp* — *ppp* — *mp* — *slow vibrato* — *subito ppppp* — *non vib.* — *touching the dark side: wrathful and menacing*
u → i – i → i – y

Soprano 2 — *ppp* — *mf* — *ppp* — *distorted, noisy*
ç (u → o → u)

Countertenor — *industrious and tireless* / mouthing, no sound, consonants voiced *p* audible — *ppp* — *p*
plan, cluster, be, pin, accompany, got s – s – pelled (u)

Tenor — *industrious and tireless* / mouthing, no sound, consonants voiced *p* audible — *ppp*
would need to see, wrote, ensure, don't kill, get, would s – (u)

Bass — *industrious and tireless* / mouthing, no sound, consonants voiced *p* audible — *ppp*
appeared, visited, dies, is, advocates, made, signed, drew, opposes s – (u)

5

S — *pppp* — *sung, tenderly* — *mp* — *pppp* — *irate snarl* — *ppp* — *sung, gently* — *fast vib.*
bi – i – u – n i n

S2 — *f* — *fffff* — *mp* — 5:4 — *ppp* — *mf*
den-ke al-so bist du / n (œ → u)

CT — *sim.* — *ppp* — *p* — *p*
causes, told, is, say, helped s – s – s – s – lit (œ)

T — *p* — *sim.* — *ppp* — *p*
s – ealed suggests, is, moved, put s – s – s – (i)

B — *p* — *sim.* — *ppp* — *p*
-s – s – end called, started, would be, wrote, face, drew s – s – (u)

Lyrics under Soprano (mm. 71–74): nach — sehnt — sich — nach

Lyrics under Countertenor (CT): scored — saw

Lyrics under Tenor (T): per - formed

Lyrics under Bass (B): falls — ris - es

with deep longing

calm and peaceful — *airy, feathery*

Lyrics under Soprano (mm. 75): Lie - be, sich nach — sehnt

Lyrics under Countertenor (CT): gasped

Lyrics under Tenor (T): **is**, tell, **en**capsulates, **try**, silence was — would be -

Lyrics under Bass (B): **was**, held, **re**plied, is, **exp**ect, **has** made — were — head - ing

S (m. 80): *sung with warmth* — mp — subito ppppp — mf
sich nach Lie - be, sehnt

spoken, distorted and very low pitch — mf — ppp
half-mute mouth with hand

S2: r Ro - se mit Dor - nen
(u)

CT: sim. — p — mf — pp
can, ripped, **done**, deliver, **was**, remained   grab   shared

T: mp — mf — sim. — pp
- gin   are, **want**, suppress, **played**, **stu**died   bu -

B: mp — mp — mf — pp
___ had ___ passed

S (m. 84): pppp — *sung, placid and thoughtful*   6/4 — 4/4   mp — slow vib. — non vib. — mf
sehnt sich   sehnt

S2: *a high coloured whisper, high frequency noises*   4/4 — p — 3
ç trifft die Fin-ger-spit-zen
(i)

CT: 6/4 — 4/4   ppp — half-mute mouth with hand — between humming and murmuring, pitched*) — pp
died, is, dived, includes, mentions, emerge, tell   walked

T: 6/4 — 4/4   ppp — half-mute mouth with hand — between humming and murmuring, pitched*) — pp
- ried   concern, has brought, applies, organized, kicked off   drove

B: 6/4 — 4/4   ppp — half-mute mouth with hand — between humming and murmuring, pitched*) — pp
roam   was, had become, followed, defeated, appeared   cau - tioned

*) Produce an internal, mumbling sound, lips can slightly open.
If the given pitch is uncomfortable or feels too high,
hum/murmur one octave lower than notated.

89

S

impatiently

quickly murmured, with short pauses at caesuras //,
lower pitch,
accent bold words **mp** and angrily

soprano continues
until her text is
finished, men stop
together
with the soprano

pp

slightly increase intensity towards end

mp

S2

attacca

Rose // reißt **Raum** // in die Wirklichkeit // mit Scherben // mit **Dornen** // mit Zerstörung // mit Liebe // mit
Wahnsinn // Löcher in mein **Lied** // lockt Blut in den **Schnee** // barfuss auf einer Wiese // meine **Schönheit** // ist **Wort***)

pp

p

⊕ sim. repeat words ad libitum

stop sound
with the cue 'Wort'

mp

CT

re - vives

creates, helps, reached, get, dropped, sent, combined,
bought, used, used, required, rode, felt, said

p

⊕ sim. repeat words ad libitum

stop sound
with the cue 'Wort'

T

walked, marks, wrote, has donated, commands, opened, had, took, came, establish, are, build up, admire,
include, approaches, screams, dominated

p

⊕ sim. repeat words ad libitum

stop sound
with the cue 'Wort'

B

studied, focused, thought, found, makes, wrote, center, said, came, was, is, said,
has, shot, used, wasn't, used, created, dies, saved, concern

*) all voices stop together
with soprano finishing 'Wort'

Part 2 ♩=72

sung, calm and with tenderness

mp

95

pp

very slow vib. accel. non vib. **pp** slow vib.

S

ist L_____ lied u——→i - y - i -

100

pp

non vib.

S

ist Sta - ub

sung, calm and with tenderness

pp **mp** **ppp**

CT

ist Sta - ub

sung, calm and with tenderness

pp **mp** **ppp**

T

ist Sta - ub

sung, calm and with tenderness

pp **mp** **ppp** **mp**

B

ist Sta - ub Sta -

*)gradual transition
from singing to low coloured noisy breath

*sudden formant change

*The mouth stays slightly open
at the end of the syllable,
as if looking at something in astonishment.

Postscript

The adjective *mordacious* addresses the irate female voice that permeates the composition. I pay homage to Homer's epos *Iliad*, which begins with the word *wrath*, summoning a female voice to sing about the fury that caused warfare and bloodshed (The wrath, goddess, sing…).

The Baroque ornament *mordent* is frequently used in this piece to enhance singular notes in the soprano part. I wished to compose an aural twinkle that might cut, bite or sting through the mechanisms of listening to open up a glimpse of another dimension. The text for the soprano summons the thorns of a rose, shards of glass, love and madness to punctuate reality and skin, to unveil what lies underneath.

I found it interesting that etymologically, the words *mordacious* and *mordent* originate from the same source, the Ancient Greek term σμερδαλέος 'smerdaleos' — *painful, horrible*. One could go further back to the ancient Indo-European '(s)merd' — *to bite, to sting*. The German word 'Schmerz' — *pain* is also connected to this origin, as well as the English term *smart*.★

★See under 'Schmerz' in:
Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm. 16 Bde. in 32 Teilbänden. Leipzig 1854-1961,
online available at http://woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB/?sigle=DWB&mode=Vernetzung&lemid=GS13601