

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.

I would like to express my gratitude to the composer Laurence Crane, and to the director of the ensemble James Weeks, for the artistic support and mentoring as well as for the stimulating creative exchange provided, and further to the EXAUDI singers Juliet Fraser, Tom Williams, Stephen Jeffes and Simon Whiteley, whose voices enhanced my inner and outer auditory realms throughout the project.

In pursuing the project and composition, I appreciate the support from the BKA Federal Chancellery of Austria, Department of Music, and from the City of Vienna, Kulturabteilung der Stadt Wien, Musik.

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 staff 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 staff 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

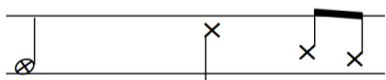
In part 2, all voices unite to perform as a quartet. The soprano is reduced to a single voice/stave S. The affective states of the performers merge to form a coherent group, and noisy productions are injected into all voices.

Notation and affective specification

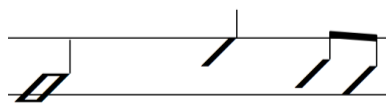
In addition to ordinary notation, different types of note-heads frame *affective* ranges for timbral sculpting.



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 staff. 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*.

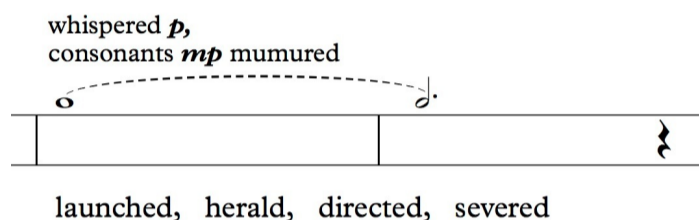
Precise formants for voiced or unvoiced productions are specified in italics in a second lyrics-line below the first text line.

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 ather
ç	as in German ' ich '
θ	as in th in (unvoiced)
ð	as in th e (voiced)
e	as in d ress
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 do
ʊ	between y and u
ɪ	as in roses, between i and ə
y	as in French ' sud ' or ' sur '
ʒ	as in vision
t', d'	consonant with aspiration, with an unvoiced breathy release

Specific German words in IPA rendering:

ich	iç
Asche	'aʃə
Staub	ʃtaʊp (au as in tower)

Special signs

•	voiced, sung
◦	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

sung, gentle and with longing
pppp *mp* *subito ppppp*
slow vibrato *non vib.* *touching the dark side: wrathful and menacing*

Soprano
 u - i - i - y

Soprano 2
 (u) o u

Countertenor
industrious and tireless mouthing, no sound, consonants voiced p audible
 plan, cluster, be, pin, accompany, got s - s - pelled
 (u)

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

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

5

S
pppp *mp* *pppp* *irate snarl*
sung, tenderly *fast vib.*
 bi - i - u - n - i

S2
f *ffff* *mp*
 5:4
 den-ke al-so bist du

CT
sim. *ppp* *p*
 causes, told, is, say, helped s - s - s - s - lit
 (æ)

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, s - s -
 wrote, face, drew (u)

11

mp very slow vib. *snarling* *pppp* as in the beginning, sung, tenderly *subito mp ppppp* slow vib. non vib. mid frequency noise

S

S2

CT

T

B

are, object, assist, raised s - s - s - ighs has been, might s -
(i) have, watch (i)

-s - een could, prescribe, would use, end s - s - s - urfaced

-s - lap wanted, wrote, make, be, was, whine, wanted s - s -

(æ) (æ)

(æ) (æ)

(æ) (æ)

(æ) (æ)

16

mp *p* *delicately* *ppp*

S

S2

CT

T

B

hie - y - i - i - u - i i i i er - i

bri - ch - t' ge-dach

-s - s - ifted has been, was, define, sh - sh - sh - redde
mention (e)

reported, isn't, made ch - anged contracted, threatened, cause
(u)

-s - topped launched, herald, directed, severed s - s -

(i) (i)

mp *p* *whispered p, consonants mp murmured* *mp* *mf* *mp* *mf* *mp* *ppp* *distorted murmur* *sharp whisper*

21 *p* *mp* *ppp*
 S *bend pitch* *vib.* *non vib.* *mp* *mp*
 S2
 CT *mf* *mf* *mp* *sim.* *mf*
 T *mf* *mf* *mp* *mf* *mf* *mp*
 B *mf* *mp* *sim.* *mp* *mf* *mp*

tə bi - i - y - i - i - n i - i -

ch (u) - ip may look, dropped, beheld ch (u)

sh (u) - sh - ows ch (u) - urned

- s - lay say, have crossed, equip, decided sh (u) - sh - rouded

25 *ppp* *mp* *mf* *ppp* *mp* *mp* *mf* *mp*
 S *snarling* *gently singing* *ppp* *mp* *mp* *mf* *mp*
 S2 *mf*
 CT *ppp* *mp* *whispered ppp* *s, z, j, ʒ extended mp*
 T *sim.* *mf*
 B *sim.* *mf* *mf* *unvoiced mp*

ich i i - ge-dacht du ge - e - dacht

uckled perch-ed, was-, s-aid, s-ee

felt, soothe, wanted, used ch (u)

performs, packed, were, save ch (u) - ops

29

spoken with disgust, as low as possible and distorted

tenderly mf *noisy* *sim. mp* *p*

S Li - i - y -

S2 Sch - Scher - ben cht - cht - ch -
(i → u) (u) (æ) (e)

CT *ppp sung, gently* *p* *sim.*
m made has-s owned, do, es-timates-s

T *p unvoiced* *whispered ppp s, z, f, 3 extended mp* *ppp sung, gently* *p* *ppp*
-attered complaines-s, ens-ure m means

B *ffff* *mf* *p* *ppp sung, gently* *mp*
z - onk m marked
(u → i)

34

ppp *pppp* *murmured, distorted and growling* *f* *ppp sung* *unvoiced noise mp* *ppp sung*

S y-i i nicht_ i i i i dort_

S2 -t' scharf - kan-tig reisst Raum ç-t'-d'
(u-i-e)

CT *p* *mp* *p* *sim.*
m makes is-s, walk, walk, s-ee, it's-s, s-aid

T *p* *mp* *p* *sim.*
m moved was-, apprec-iate, caus-ed, is-s

B *p* *whispered ppp s, z, f, 3 extended mp* *p*
careened, fus-es-s, love, s-aid m

38

mp *mf* *mp* *pppp* *gently* *mp*

slow vib.

spoken, very low distorted

p

6

u - und i - ihr

drin-nen draus-sen zwi-schen

ppp *mp* *ppp* *p* *mp* *sim.*

n needs n no-ted migrates-s, render, come

ppp *mp* *sim.* *p*

n name prove, s-often walk -

mp *sim.* *p* *mp*

mur-dered res-pect, love, love, is-s, have s-prung ask

43

mp *mp* *pppp* *mp* *ppp*

3

3

ein Füh - l - len

mp *mf* *sim.* *p*

are depends-s, s-ober came

mp *mp* *mp* *mp* *sim.*

- ed dress - ed was-s,

p *mp* *sim.*

grew is-s, have created, reduc-e,

47

very high lip pressure fricative noises

pppp *mf*

PPP *mp* *p*

slow vib.

i - n - nen ||: ha:| a

mp *mp* *mf* *mp*

crie - d have

mp *mf* *mf*

compromis-e, alternated, s-ing, manipulated band - ed

p *mf* *mf*

dis-tinguish-sh, is-s, was-s, requires-s knew has-s, are paid, gras-p,

52

mf *mp* *ppp* *mp* *tr* *ppp*

sharply spoken

with great longing

wrathfully groaning

ha ha - ha - hal - ten

Halt!

ppp

η (uo)

p *mp* *p* *mp*

confronted, was-s pre - pares drove

whispered *mp* s, z, ʃ, ʒ extended *mp*

p *mf mp* *p*

is-s, talked, was-s, dew, was-s couldn' t' see couldn' -

(u)

p *mp* *p* *mp*

helps-s give tell

56 *plaintive pp* *pp* *with intensity mp* *ppp p* *ppp p*

S hal-ten hal-ten hal - ten ha hal - ten aa hal - ten

S2

CT *sim.* *p* *mp*

called, had s-een, made, had undergone wound

T *mf* *mp* *sim.* *p*

- t' see (u) had, wrote, had s-et out, know, argued con -

B *sim.* *p* *mp* *sim.*

was-s, ceas-ed, are, fear, could make say carry,

59 *gentle pppp* *pppp mf* *tr* *sharp and noisy murmur mp* *gentle pppp* *threatening hiss mf* *as before, light and delicate pppp*

S aa aa hal - ten a-a a-a a-a

S2 *mp* *mf*

aus-sen sehnt sich s (y → i)

CT *ppp* *mp* *sim.*

would not have been a ble limit, meet, s-tep,

T *mp* *sim.*

- tem - pla - ted ex-plained, had,

B *ppp* *mf* *mf*

rely, s-elect can can

p < *mp* > *f* > *mp*

63 *hissing* *sharply whispered*

S *ppp* < *mf* > *ppp ffff* *sehnt* *tə*

S2 *s* *sticht*
(*i* → *u* → *i*)

CT *p* *mp* *mp* *mf*
mus-t be, permit, waits-s *be* *be*

T *p* *mp* *mp*
written, become, s-trive, fails-, is-s *sur* - *vived* *be*

B *p* *p* *sim.* *mp* *mf*
see *s-aid, are, communicate, make, is-s* *be*

ppp < *mp* > *ppp* < *mp* > *mf* < *ppp* >

67 *delicate* *playful and light*

S *ppp* < *mp* > *ppp* < *mp* > *mf* < *ppp* >
nach Lie - be *sehnt* *sehnt* *sich*

CT *mf* *p*
told, make, **hunt**, deliver, **had** thought, do, **attack**, **can** *has*

T *mf* *p*
wrote, **was**, thought, **got**, shines, **has** yielded *have*

B *mf* *p*
imagine, helped, **has**, said, **said**, spent, enjoys, **hosts**

murmured p, very low pitch, accent highlighted syllables mp

71 *p* *tr* *mp* *mf* *ppp*

with deep longing

S nach sehnt sich nach

CT scored saw

T per - formed

B falls ris - es

75 *calm and peaceful* *p* *tr* *ppp* *airy, feathery*

S Lie - be, sich nach sehnt

CT *p* *ppp* gasped

T *sim.* *p* *ppp* *p* is, tell, encapsulates, try, silence was would be -

B *sim.* *p* *ppp* was, held, replied, is, expect, has made were head - ing

80 *mp* sung with warmth *subito ppppp* *mf* spoken, distorted and very low pitch

S sich nach Lie - be, sehnt

S2 *mf* *ppp* half-mute mouth with hand
r (u) Ro - se mit Dor - nen

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

T *mp* *mf* *sim.* *pp*
- gin are, want, suppress, played, studied bu -

B *mp* *mp* *mf* *pp*
had passed

84 *pppp* sung, placid and thoughtful *a high coloured whisper, high frequency noises* *mp* *mf* slow vib. non vib.

S sehnt sich

S2 *p* *ppp* half-mute mouth with hand
c (i) trifft die Fin-ger-spit-zen

CT *ppp* half-mute mouth with hand
⊕ between humming and murmuring, pitched*)
died, is, dived, includes, mentions, emerge, tell walked

T *ppp* half-mute mouth with hand
⊕ between humming and murmuring, pitched*)
ried concern, has brought, applies, organized, kicked off drove

B *ppp* half-mute mouth with hand
⊕ between humming and murmuring, pitched*)
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.

104

S

CT

T

B

*) *p* \leftarrow *ffff* \rightarrow

low coloured, extended croaking mumur
mp scornful

u (u - o - u) ist Wort

*) *p* \leftarrow *ffff* \rightarrow

mp whispered *ffff* 3 *ppp* scornful *mp*

u (u - o - u) ist Schön-heit ist Wort
(u - u \rightarrow i)

*) *p* \leftarrow *ffff* \rightarrow

low frequency croaking noise, *p* changing colour *mp*

- ub u (u - o - u) α (o \rightarrow u \rightarrow o \rightarrow a)

*) gradual transition from singing to low coloured noisy breath

111

S

CT

T

B

p *mf* *p* *ffff* *mp*

ist A - sche unvoiced noise ist

(u \rightarrow i)

mp *p*

A - sche ist

mp *mf* *p* *ffff* *mp*

A - sche ist i -

p *mf* *p* *ffff* *mp*

ist A - sche unvoiced noise ist

(α - o \rightarrow u \rightarrow α)

116

S *pp* A - a - sche *>* pause with intensity

CT *mp* ist *pp* A - a - sche *>* pause with intensity

T *mp* - ist *pp* A - a - sche *>* pause with intensity

B *pp* A - a - sche *>* pause with intensity

121

S *mf* whispered *mp* quickly whispered, in a natural rhythm and low colour, keep repeating
 ist Staub ||: ist Asche ist Staub :||

CT *mp* quickly whispered, in a natural rhythm and low colour, keep repeating
 ||: am Ende ist Asche :||

T *mp* quickly whispered, in a natural rhythm and low colour, keep repeating *p* *5*
 Staub ||: am Ende ist Staub :|| ist A - sche

B *mp* quickly whispered, in a natural rhythm and low colour, keep repeating
 ||: unser aller Ende ist Staub und Asche :||
 (u → o → a → o) *vocal fry* slow variations of density reduce to irr. single percussive sounds, less and less often

128

S *mp* am En - de *f* (u - i)* *fff*

CT *mp* am En - de *f* (o - e)* *fff* *p* ist

T *mp* am En - de *f* (æ - e)* *fff* *p* i -

B *mp* am En - de *f* (æ - e)* *fff*

*sudden formant change

135

S *p* ist A - sche am En - de *mp* am En - de *p* *pp*

CT A - sche am En - de *mp* am En - de *p* *pp*

T - ist A - sche am En - de *mp* am En - de *p* *pp*

B *ppp* am En - de *mp* am En - de *pp*

142

pp *rit. ppp*

S i - ist Sta - a - u -

CT i - i - ist Sta - a - u -

T i - ist Sta - a - u -

B i - ist Sta - a - u -

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

149

p *mf*

S -u - u u - bæ

CT -u - u u - bæ

T -u - u u - bæ

B -u - u u - bæ

low coloured breath

inaudible, mouthed gesture freeze and hold until end*

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>