

An Interview with Philip Miller

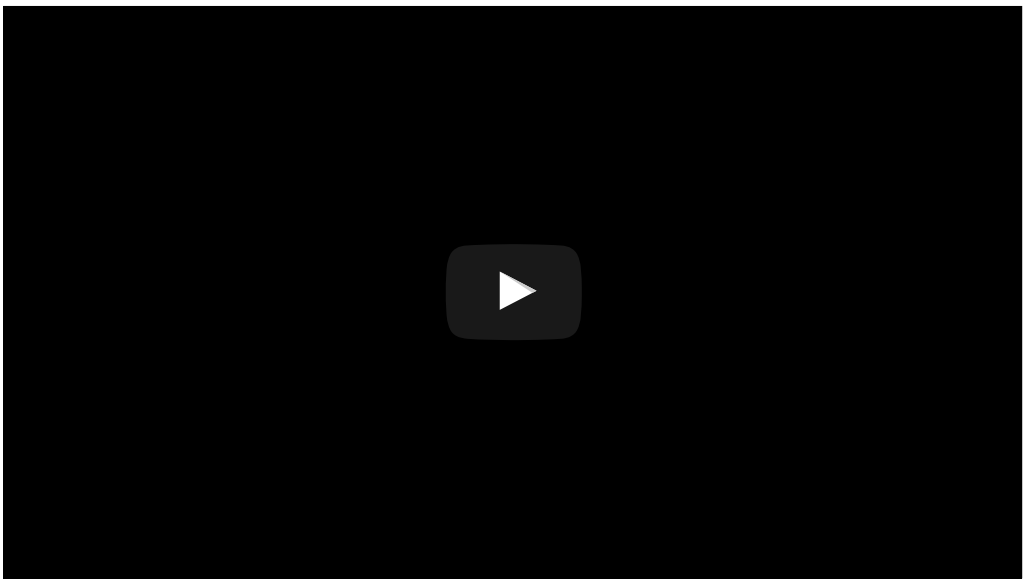
BY BASTIAN ZIMMERMANN · TITLE IMAGE ELLEN ELMENDORP · DATE 07/07/2016

The South African composer Philip Miller isn't in his room. I'm at the reception of Berlin's Ellington Hotel, and I'm about to go home, but there he is, hurrying around the corner. There were some last minute technical problems in his work "Refuse the Hour," a collaboration with the artist William Kentridge and the choreographer Dada Masilo, that had to be taken care of. We sit down in the lounge, as the preparations for Germany's soccer game against Italy reach fever pitch.

***VAN*: IN A LECTURE TO THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION, YOU TALKED ABOUT "BREAKING THE SILENCE"—AS A COMPOSER THROUGH YOUR SOUNDS, BUT ALSO IN THE FABRIC OF SOCIETY. WHEN IS THIS IMPORTANT?**

Philip Miller: I was talking specifically about my piece "REwind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape & Testimony." It's a choral piece, working with the taped testimonies from the TRC, which happened over a period of almost 10 years once apartheid had been dismantled. As a white South African, and a person who believes that there is hope in this country—that we have to be able to live together in a post-apartheid and non-racial way—I felt I needed to express something about this process. Though I myself was not necessarily directly involved, I was still touched and wanted to express something as a composer about the fact that people were talking.

Remember, in apartheid people were banned not just from writing, but also from speaking. Silence was used [on purpose]. People expressed their anger and refusal to accept apartheid by singing, among other ways. A lot of protests used songs that were either related to church or the labor movement, songs that said: "We don't want to live under apartheid." In post-apartheid, in a democracy, I was thinking, What does it mean to be part of that? How do you take the voices of people who have never been able to express or tell their stories before, and bring them into the context of music and sound?



WHAT IS YOUR MUSICAL BACKGROUND?

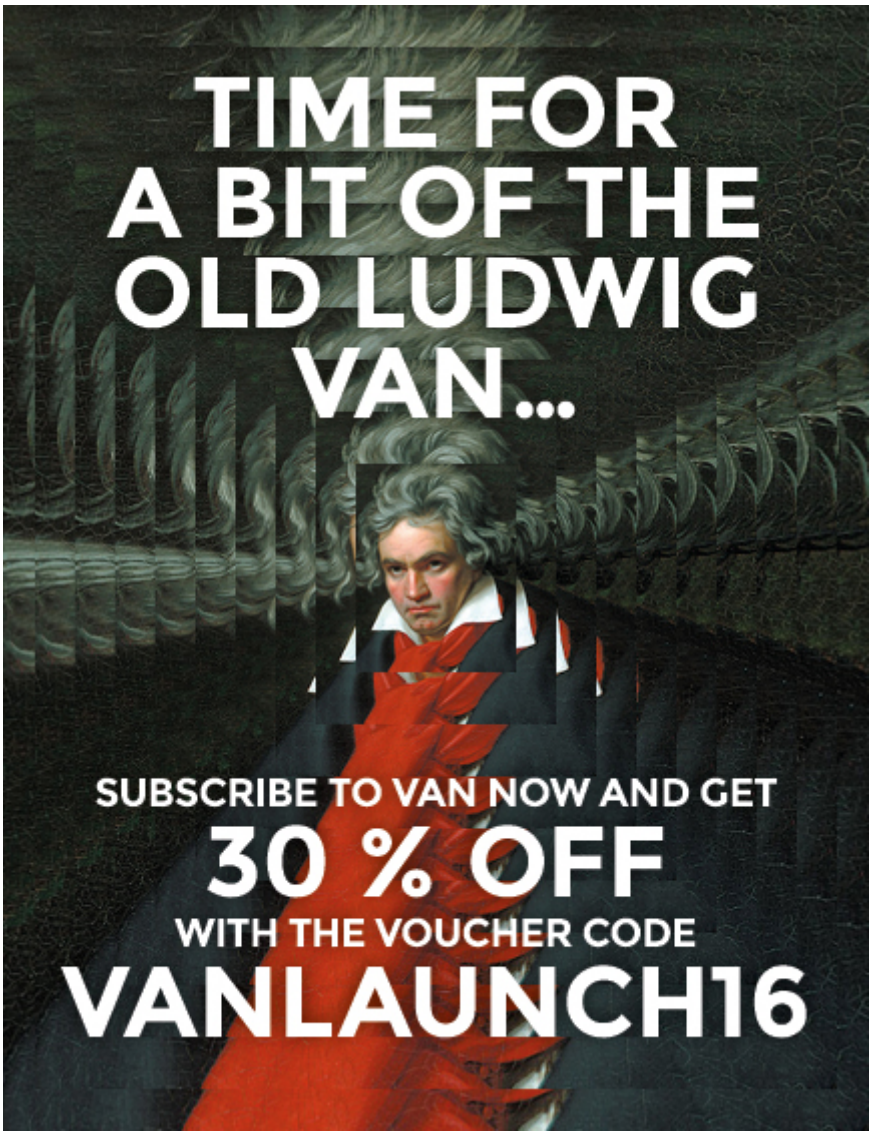
I didn't come from a strict musical or compositional school at all. I did learn instruments, and I studied composition in England, but I didn't go through a strict music school education. After the 1980s, I decided to work full time in music, and in some ways I was free of the very strong pressures on a lot of composers, who either work in electronic music or in serialism. I was free of Stockhausen and John Cage.

In most cases I work—and in some ways, this does touch on what Stockhausen called "intuitive music writing"—without a finished idea. I work through a process of experimentation and improvisation, and if I'm working with a group of musicians, I bring a certain set of ideas, almost musical plans: things that will lead the musicians to enter or form a musical dialogue. I'm very interested in the idea of people listening to each other and responding to each other through listening.

YOU'RE PRESENTING A PIECE AT DARMSTADT THIS SUMMER. WHAT IS IT LIKE GOING THERE AS A SOUTH AFRICAN COMPOSER?

I'm very aware of the fact that South Africa was quite disconnected. Certainly, by the 1970s and '80s, there was a cultural boycott—a strong disconnect from what was going on in Europe and America, because of apartheid. The government was very fearful of what the people could learn from the revolutionary movements of Europe. And of course modern music was very revolutionary. Minimalism, with La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, was happening in the U.S. in the '70s, and in South Africa we were still thinking, Oh, we should be doing serialism and electronic music.

When I was in Darmstadt this year, I was quite interested in thinking about how disconnected South Africa was. Where were the African voices in Darmstadt? Where were the Black composers? Which is not to say that none of those composers thought about it. Stockhausen speaks a lot about music from other parts of the world, like Japan. He came to South Africa in 1971. I've started using a workshopping technique where I'll use fragments of his lectures that he gave with South African singers. He also met the anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko, one of the most important Black Consciousness leaders in South Africa, but who was assassinated tragically in 1978. It's an interesting fact that those two revolutionaries met.



WHAT ARE THE KINDS OF SOUNDS THAT MATTER TO YOU?

I like to speak in terms of a sound world. This world includes birdcalls from my city, there's a particular bird that you can hear there. Or particular church songs: the singers in Johannesburg were often worshipping and practicing outside, on a street corner, where I was living. Those sound worlds influenced me as much as practicing Bach as a young pianist.

CAN YOU TELL ME A BIT ABOUT YOUR COLLABORATION WITH THE ARTIST WILLIAM KENTRIDGE, PARTICULARLY YOUR UPCOMING PIECES HERE AT THE BERLINER FESTSPIELE?

The first is "Paper Music," a chamber work. It's about working with drawings on paper and using animations as a way of making a connection to sound, and vice versa. Our process is often contemporaneous. He will draw something, abstract or figurative, film it, and make an animated sequence of it. Those pieces of moving paper can be read so differently depending on the sound

that is attached to them. It's the same as in any commercial film: you read a scene, interpret it, understand it, often very differently, depending on the sound or the music.

Our work often reflects the visual and sonic world of Johannesburg. One example is a piece I've done with William, called "Lullaby for a House Alarm." Most houses in Johannesburg have an alarm system. We've also done pieces where he listened to something, he didn't tell me what, and he drew lines to that music; and then he handed me the video of the line-making, and I had to respond with sound.



WILLIAM KENTRIDGE ON STAGE.

"Refuse the Hour" is a big collaborative work which has traveled for many years that involves video, sound, sculpture; William reading a series of lectures danced by Dada Masilo; and a small ensemble of musician and singers. It's a strange piece, we call it a lecture performance. It evolves questions about time, both philosophically and in terms of science and physics.



"REFUSE THE HOUR," AT THE DESIGN INDABA FESTIVAL IN SOUTH AFRICA, FEBRUARY 2015.

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT THE THEATER STAGE IS A MORE NATURAL FIT FOR YOUR WORK THAN THE CONCERT HALL. DO YOU FEEL CLOSER TO THAT SCENE?

I don't know the music scene well enough here, but in South Africa, perhaps, the differences aren't as strong, because of technology. If you want to make a video, you can do that by yourself; people are able to work cross media. That's changed the way we should look at the world of sound and music. The concert hall hasn't affected me. I see myself working with the people who I'm interested in.

The stories the people told in "REwind" were very profound and involved complicated negotiations. We performed the work in New York, and a lot of African-American singers were thinking about their own repression, and slavery. It wasn't about singing the piece in the most beautiful way, it became a conversation. The text and the sounds talked to them. Working with people is the most exciting part of the process. [Besides that], I don't think about the music world.

IF YOU HAD UNLIMITED RESOURCES, WHAT KIND OF PROJECT WOULD YOU REALIZE?

I want to work on projects that have meaning for me. Right now I'm doing a soundscape project for a woman's museum in South Africa. My idea was to work with women who are not in a professional choir—I want to work with women who have had special experiences, whether as mothers or protestors. One group is from Khayelitsha, a stark, difficult place to live. Their voices literally become part of the sound world. I'd love to work more across South Africa. I'd like to travel, because you often end up working in the big cities.

AT YOUR SPEECH TO THE TRC, YOU SAID THAT YOU SOMETIMES GET DEPRESSED, THINKING ABOUT HOW PEOPLE WILL HEAR PIECES LIKE "REWIND," THEN GO HOME, AND NOTHING WILL CHANGE.

Sometimes, audiences respond very strongly, and talk to you afterwards, and you think: what can you do with all that emotion? I go home, they go home, perhaps to places where things

haven't changed that much, or not as much as you would have hoped. I was asked to do that piece again, and I'm hesitant about whether I should. ¶

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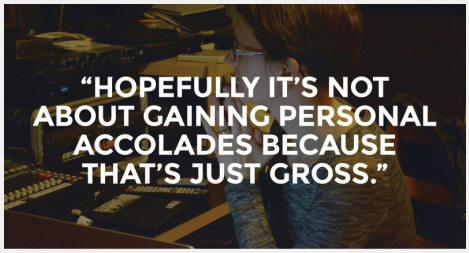
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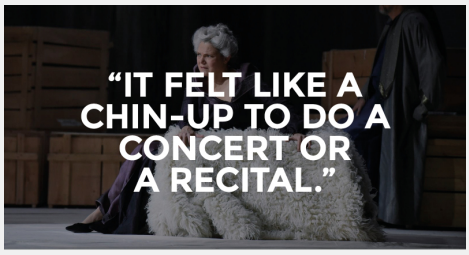
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