



# WITH NO FANFARE

## INTERVIEW WITH SAMUEL ACHACHE

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**Music is at the heart of the way you practice your art. How did you approach it in *Drumless*?**

**Samuel Achache:** I've realised the work we do with the company tends more and more towards composing. Our early shows were based on a narrative musical form, namely, opera. Then, with *Fugues*, we chose as our theme a musicology question, that of temperament, then we starting inventing stories in which the music replaced the words to express what the words could no longer say. Today we're going even further by trying to find principles of musical writing intrinsically tied to dramatic action. One cannot exist without the other: music isn't there to support an action, or to give it more depth; it changes its meaning, turning words into a chasm of meaning. So we're also taking more liberties when it comes to the scores we're basing our music on. In *Drumless*, we wondered about how best to let Robert Schumann's Lieder unfold, so that they can tell the audience what we see when we hear them. What happens if those melodies are no longer played by a voice and a piano, but by a tiny makeshift orchestra? Or just by a cello? How can we start with a motif and build on it in our own way? That's where our work becomes about composing: we're not so much rearranging as extracting hidden elements from the score to use them as the starting point for a new creation. Bringing together actors, singers, and musicians—some performers taking on two or more of those roles at once—on the stage also plays a large part. We think and write together. Each of us, through the creative process, develops his or her own unique relationship to music, including the non-musicians who, maybe precisely because they're not trained in musical writing, can allow us to find forms we didn't expect. For instance, thanks to them we wondered about prosody, that is, the music we create while talking. It encouraged us to explore the language we use every day, to transform it to give it a larger scope until music takes over for words. And those words, which may have seem trivial at first, rise to reach a lyrical dimension and take on a new meaning, a new thickness: the very act of speaking becomes epic. As if all of a sudden, opening up this inner chasm of language allowed us to hear the chaos that allowed those words to emerge, beyond their meaning.

**Why Lieder? Why Robert Schumann and the Romantic poets?**

We'd already worked on this repertoire for the show *La Chute de la maison (The Fall of the House)* with Jeanne Candel; but we felt like we'd only scratched the surface, without exploring all that we could do. What's interesting about Lieder is that they work like precipitates, like perfectly closed units with a beginning, a middle, and an end. In that sense they represent an important notion for the Romantics, that of the absolute, which they thought they could only reach with small forms, pieces, fragments. The "Wanderer," a recurring figure in Romantic literature that brings to mind the *poète maudit*, isn't a contemplative or whining loafer. On the contrary, he acts. He may not know where he is going, but he keeps moving forward. As for the Lieder, although they are not narrative pieces, they tend towards something, they describe a movement and thus a form of action. If you take a closer look, you'll realise that the Romantics were much more aware of what was going on around them than we tend to believe—they weren't all that self-centered. They watched the world at a remove, hence the constant irony you'll find in the Lieder. It's much funnier than it seems: the poet stands at an ironic remove from what he's producing, he isn't fooled by any of it! Heinrich Heine's writing, for instance, is incredibly sharp-witted, he can in one sentence make you laugh about the most tragic thing in the world. It's in that form of humour we can find things to grab onto. I'm always finding new echoes between Romanticism and our own way of creating, through the motifs of collage, of fragments, or in that way they had of rubbing one thing and its opposite together to create a new idea. In a way, they're the forefathers of the Surrealists! All of which gives a particular depth to their works.

### **Can you tell us more about the dramaturgy you created for this music?**

We approach the Lieder as fragments of a past story, which we might discover only in the epilogue. As if right from the start everything was already over, as if we faced a collapse, a hopeless catastrophe where all that remains is nostalgia for what brought us to this point. But what happens if we consider those pieces not as an outcome, but as a beginning? Not as a closed, fixed, form, but as an active opening onto the world? We wondered about the echoes that music could find within us, in our own personal collapses—whether it be a break-up or a death... How can those chasms open towards other spaces? In *Drumless*, the fiction, the stage, and the music explore that same question, each with its own language, and all three of them evolve in the same way. On stage, we had the idea of creating a domestic space, a house, which breaks apart before our eyes piece by piece until all is left is a ruin, a desert. The same is true of the music: we carve it up until all that's left is the structure, until we've removed even the flesh of the sound. We end up playing those Lieder on a piano we prepared beforehand, altering its sound by putting objects on its strings... it's very surprising! It's the same music still, but we're not hearing it the same way at all. That being said, that collapse isn't synonymous with annihilation: on the contrary, it opens up imaginary and fictional spaces. What seems at first to be a catastrophe is actually the beginning of an opening to any and all possibilities. All of that with, as its starting point, a tiny fragment of personal history...

### ***Drumless* is also a reflection on memory. What form does it take in the show?**

When a space or a story ceases to exist, all that remains of it is its memory. To enter the imaginary space of the characters, at the moment where they experience such a loss, means also to enter their memory. How can we visit those engrams, that is, the traces left in us by our memories, in order to reinvent new stories? What do we recompose based on the memories we have of things? Some motifs are part of us, are what made us, even though we didn't necessarily experience them ourselves. That's how we can see Tristan and Isolde suddenly appear in the show, or a Romantic painting... or a Lied. Because that's precisely what music allows: to reestablish a direct link between our conscience and an image, one we've experienced or just imagined. In his *Nebenstuck*, composer Gérard Pesson recomposes a piece by Johannes Brahms he used to listen to a lot when he was a teenager. And twenty years later, he tries to recompose it solely from memory. Of course, what he ends up with is not Brahms; but by recomposing his memory, he lets us see how this motif rises out of the fog of his recollection... and it's beautiful. It's an example I find particularly inspiring. How, by trying to remember something, does one end up recomposing a Lied? Melodies can come from a different music, from a more concrete sound, even from a story; then the actors use them and integrate them even in their words, even if those aren't musical. They weave them together. The Lieder then become the driving force behind stories—but not the ones we'd expect! This music is so personal, it moves each of us who listen to it so intimately, that the images it brings to mind can only be unique to each individual. And yet, it's always the same music.

Interview conducted by Marie Lobrichon