

Interview with Peter Wessel

author of the Polyfonías poetry project

Antoine Cassar



Photograph: Peter Wessel at the Poesiefestival Berlin. (c) gezett.de

During tonight's *Notte Bianca-Lejl Imdawwal*, 'Dar l-Ewropa', the EC Representation Office in St. Paul's Street, Valletta, will be opening its doors to the public to mark the European Day of Languages with a spectacle of languages, poetry and music. The main guest for the evening is 'Polyfonías', a renowned musical trio spearheaded by Danish poet Peter Wessel, accompanied by Mark Solborg (Denmark/Argentina) on the keyboard and guitar, and Salvador Vidal (Spain) on the clarinet. Polyfonías is an innovative project of music and poetry which intertwines verse in Danish, English, French and Spanish – the four languages in which Wessel grew up –, not only to make order out of an external, Babelian chaos, but to transmit, at times with genuine hypnotism, a profound inner peace.

The Polyfonías trio has performed in festivals across Europe, most recently at the Poesiefestival Berlin in a common reading with Maltese poet Antoine Cassar. Wessel's poem *Un idioma sin fronteras*, set to music by Mark Solborg, was awarded last year with the 2008culturas prize, organised by the Spanish Ministry of Culture to mark the European Year for Intercultural Dialogue.

A. C. *How was the Polyfonías project born?*

P. W. I was brought up bilingually Danish/English and began writing poetry in Danish from a very young age. In 1967 I went to California as an exchange student and that was a very crucial year. I started playing the clarinet, I went to hear Miles, Monk and Dizzy Gillespie at famous nightclubs such as Shelley's Manne Hole in L.A. and I returned to Denmark with a huge stack of records and material for a collection of poetry in English. In Denmark I met a French girl and soon we both went off to live in Paris together. That turned out to be a five year apprenticeship in French culture, and my entry into transnational fatherhood: my daughter Tania was Born in Montmartre in 1973, making my ties to France a lifetime affair. In 1981 I moved to Mallorca to nurse my mother, who was seriously ill, and there I met my present Spanish wife. We left Mallorca in 1990, the year "In Place of Absence", my second book of poetry, was published in Baltimore, and moved to a remote village in the mountains north of Madrid. There, in the solitude of the mountains, and with only the foxes and the squirrels to talk to during the day when my wife was at work, and after a pregnancy of three years, the emotional and cultural landscapes that I had traversed came together in a polyphonic mesh of Danish, English, French and Spanish. For somebody who has lived with jazz all his life, the mental link to a musical form that is the result of a cross-breeding of musical traditions of various cultures was only a click away. The essentially vocal roots of the African component of jazz, my interest in Medieval oral poetry and my conviction that I'm a musician who happens to express himself through poetry all explain the birth of the Polyfonías Poetry Project.

Do you feel that certain traits of your personality or outlook on life are expressed better in one language as opposed to the others?

No, not really. I don't actually think about the origin of the words that I use. They don't have national labels on my palette. When I started out, you had, as an artist, to have an ideology – be engaged in the world and try to make it a better place to live – and also be an avant-gardist – you had to make it new. I think the poet has more in common with the philosopher than with the novelist. But poetry should not think, it should make you think. Think and feel. The short-circuits of translingual poetry have helped me stop making sense, as I say in one of my poems. And music has helped me get rid of language barriers. A rhythm or a melody occurs to me and the words begin to fall into place without me interfering too much. The melody will seek the colours and rhythms among the words of the four cultures I feel part of, and simultaneously my desire to understand will direct the search and, if I'm lucky, come up with a poem, a formula, an insight through the not altogether comprehensible mixture of languages. Nevertheless, when I feel I've finished the poem I have forgotten the melody. In fact, it was never a song: the melody simply served as a compositional conceit. Apparently Emily Dickinson used a similar technique. It is said that many of her poems can be song to the tune of "Yellow Rose of Texas"! I think the musicality of the Polyfonías is part of the reason that people who only understand one or two of the languages I use often tell me after the recital that they've "understood everything".

Robert Frost once famously remarked that "Poetry is that which is lost in translation", a quote you often refer to when introducing your performances. However, it is interesting to notice that translation itself is a one of the colourful ingredients of your poems - stringing together the words 'woman, femme, mujer, kvinde', for example, highlights the subtle yet explicit differences in nuance, and in the very idea of 'woman', among the four languages. How often do you use this device? Can you really call it 'translation'?

No, this technique which I sometimes refer to as "glissandi of meaning" or "cubist poetry" is a good proof of Frost's observation. I realise that I'm threading on dangerous ground, but to my mind a Danish kvinde is very different from a Spanish mujer: they're the expressions of femininity in two very different cultures. So when I say "femmes, mujeres, women, kvinder" I speak about four entirely different experiences: femininity seen from the viewpoints of four different cultures. This is a good, but very exceptional example of my usage of this technique. Each culture has examples of words that so incarnate a specific state or emotion that other languages have had to adopt these words. Think of "siesta". Is that a "nap"? No. If we say "siesta" we all of a sudden conjure up an entire cluster of associations of what for us is Spanish. But if we use words which for us are "exotic" in poetry, I mean without having smelled them, tasted them and listened to them before actually writing them for the first time, we risk falling into clichés, and since poetry ought to help break up fixed linguistic habits and thought patterns, I prefer to stick to the four cultures I'm entirely familiar with. That I fell in love with and married into. I'm an improviser, but I want to be in control. Be sure of what I'm doing. "If you can't hear what the blues is, don't ask." Quote Miles.

How does music influence the Polyfonías in general? Do Mark Solborg and Salvador Vidal's particular styles influence your poetry?

I think I've given you a pretty clear idea of the importance that music has for me and for my composing of poetry. I've chosen to work with Mark and Salvador because they come from two entirely different musical worlds. Salvador was trained in the tradition of European classical music, but is especially fond of twentieth century serial music, while Mark is a player and composer of contemporary music in the jazz vein. They are true professional musicians who can play anything they feel like playing. And when we're together they feel like playing Polyfonías. Mark is the musical director of the project and he writes the often minimalistic themes which he and Salvador then use as the fundament for their improvising around my voice. We're a very close-knit group, and reading with them I understand how Bill Evans must have felt playing with Scott LaFaro and Paul Motian.

Any new books or cds in the pipeline?

I've lived most of my life in big cities like Copenhagen, Paris, L.A. and Madrid, yet I grew up in the countryside and this background is easy to trace in the rhythms, *motifs* and metaphors in the first batch of Polyfonías. I feel I'm beginning to master the big city idiom

and we've brought a couple of examples of urban Polyfonías with us to Malta. Hopefully a new CD-record will be in the making before next fall.

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