

JANICE JACKSON CREATES A TRUE MELTING-POT

By Angeline Augustus-Kersten
Brabants Dadblad, Netherlands

No sea is too high for soprano **Janice Jackson**. Byzantine, Indian, Japanese, and Western elements assimilated into music of English, Greek, Spanish, and Dutch composers. She created a true melting-pot in her concert of last Sunday in the Music Center, den Bosch. And as if that was not enough, she combined singing with acting to make an impressive performance.

What the different music styles had in common was their age. Not one piece dated before 1995. And then there was the themes. Death, a kidnapping, and claustrophobia do not inspire happiness. Coincidence, this line, or do composers at the present moment enjoy morbidity as a compositional basis?

Reine's **Drag on claustrophobia**, one of the most impressive pieces in this concert, is a composition, which grates on the nerves. This does not only have to do with its length, but, mostly with its electric expressiveness where the suppression of an almost hysterical **angst** seems to take center stage. Blood curdling music with no possibility of escape. Whoever would have the opportunity to listen to this piece several times in a row and remain completely unmoved truly has nerves of steel. Any sane person would probably flee the hall screaming after such a sampling.

It is not only singing which Jackson does here. It is "**vocal art**" and performance in one, whereby body language fulfills an essential role. And this is not the only piece where this is true.

In **Les maus d'amer** by Theo Abazis body and voice flow together to become one thrilling, acting, resonating, expressive device. Singing, clapping, chattering, clucking, and for the most part looking, Jackson becomes a new being, where the question could be whether she is an actress, singer, pantomime player, or a percussion instrument?

Daring

Yet in the center of all of this one thing is quite clear: **Janice Jackson** as a singer alone is **world class**. Jackson has **daring** and an **exceptional talent**. But, above all it is evident that she is a **craftswoman**.

Brabants Dagblad, The Netherlands

Angst ridden to glorious heights

Stephen Pedersen / Arts Reporter, The Halifax Chronicle Herald

I wonder if anyone warned the neighbors on Shirley Street that every night, Thursday to Sunday, last week and this, the house at 6144 would be full of screaming, gagging, babbling, moaning, choking and mewling between 8 and 9 p.m.

The owners of YHZ Gallery at 6144, are not playing horror movies on TV. It is just soprano Janice Jackson unleashing her astonishing vocal technique and nuclear dramatic power in a show called Angst.

Three of the four solo vocal works were written for her - Roger Marsh's Sazu Baba, Theo Abazis's Les Maus d'amer and Alice Ping Yee Ho's Angst, which provided Jackson with a title for her show.

Jackson is a gift from the gods for composers straining to throw off the chains of art song. Her repertoire of extended vocal techniques, noises, pops, screams and guttural grunts, to say nothing of her rapid fire dental and labial consonants is so subservient to her hurricane whim, she can fire them off at any volume, jump registers faster than thought, twist a vowel on a dime, and leap all over the vocal map like a demented flea.

Her show is staged in a house. Only 20 people can be accommodated.

In the front room in an alcove beside the fireplace, Jackson croaks and wobbles as the harridan at the gates of Hell demanding tribute from the dead (Sazu Baba).

In the dining room, a woman tormented by devils utters insane cadenzas and tears newspapers upon which bloody symbols are painted (Angst).

In the kitchen, walls draped by pages of the score of Les Maus d'amer, a terrified soldier plays a comb, salutes, pounds his chest and jerks like a marionette as an alien takes possession of him.

Finally we move to the front hall stairs where Jackson in the closet, behind a black gauze curtain in which a pin-light shines at mouth height, sings Luciano Berio's Sequenza III, a 20th century masterpiece now 36 years old.

And how she sings it. Her performance, as well as the work itself, is a tour-de-force of emotional virtuosity.

And here, in the most technically demanding work of the concert, after nearly an hour of virtuosic singing, Jackson sounds just as strong and as fresh as she did at the start of the hour.

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Jackson burns up stage as Vonda

STEPHEN PEDERSEN | [Concert Review, Halifax Chronicle Herald](#)

Vonda de Ville in *Temporal Follies* is something of a tour de force. As a vehicle for the flamboyant virtuosity of soprano Janice Jackson it is rich in imaginative possibility, and Jackson makes a full-deal meal of it in the 60-minute opera that opened Wednesday in the Bus Stop Theatre and plays through Sunday at 8 p.m. every night.

Lukas Pearse, independent Halifax composer/ improviser/ double-bassist, has created for Vonda a prodigiously detailed electronic score of samples and digitized sounds that roams the early days of radio and recording to illustrate his opera's thesis: Vonda is an early 20th century music hall singer who is one of the first stage performers to be recorded and who, in the somewhat grandiose terminology of the opera, "loses her soul" to technology.

What we see in *Vonda* is no threat to the Faust legend, our culture's most infamous story of selling one's soul to the devil. If technology, whether analog or digital, is the bad guy, even the devil has lost his soul to it.

It is a glib concept in *Vonda de Ville*. Not something in 2010 that you can get away with in the absence of an agent of evil like, say, Hitler or Stalin or Osama bin Laden. It's hard to see technology in such a role without winding all the way back to the invention of the steam engine and the Luddites who attacked job-sucking machines with crowbars and two-by-fours.

But Pearse's opera does speak to 20th century alienation, a by-product of this increasing mechanization of "reality," although these days we are in less danger of losing our souls to the devil than to the latest Apple iDevice.

Which, perhaps, is Pearse's point.

Apart from begging the question of what exactly he means by the soul, Pearse has created a semi-comical, immensely detailed view of a human being drowning in metastasized technological static. *Temporal Follies* starts innocently enough with sounds of running water, birds, insects and distant thunder that are gradually invaded by Morse Code, a squelched wireless radio sound, the telephone (Hello Central, Get Me Heaven), laugh tracks, a hilariously brash version of Charles K. Hall's *After The Ball* (1891), and a motivic phrase — "You had to be there!" — which is repeated by Jackson in a nasal intonation as sharp as a screwdriver.

Jackson runs through a repertoire of singing voices all born, it seems, from Ethel Merman — brash, penetrating, loud enough to shatter plate glass. A garbled collage of Victrola windup record players and radio shows, a hilarious sequence of catcalls in which Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag*, jazz, electricity, radio, Muzak, phonographs, and reel-to-reel (real-to-reel?) are accused of killing music.

Jackson's costumes (by Arianne Pollet-Brannon) are variations on a theme of rags, and bustles, and circus clown colours in which headpieces mark the progress of the story. At one point Jackson wears a megaphone looking like a giant Victorian lampshade, which appears to have bitten off her head, and at another a red plastic LP, jauntily tilted on the top of her hair.

The powerful creative team bringing this bizarre work of imagination to the stage includes Marty Burt

(director), Leigh Ann Vardy (lighting design), Mary Lou Martin (choreographer) and Bob Chiasson (set design).

As performance art and musical/ electronic wizardry, Temporal Follies is amazingly imaginative — brilliant even. But as art, it does not penetrate further, and, in fact, not anywhere near as far as James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, written in 1941. Not an easy read, but a fabulously rich motherlode of verbal cultural disintegration.

Vonda de Ville in Temporal Follies is Pearse's own night mare vision of music culture's disintegration: Vonda's Wake.

Jackson a performer like no other in body, song

STEPHEN PEDERSEN Arts Reporter, Halifax Chronicle Herald

Janice Jackson's *Wolf Moon*, which opened a four-night run on the stage of the Sir James Dunn Theatre on Thursday night, is a tour-de-force of the highest order.

With only a few props and no scenery, she holds the stage for 90 minutes of singing and acting in four contemporary mini-operas. Her vocalization is virtually non-stop and there is no intermission.

We are not just talking stamina here. The vocal challenges set for her by composers Barbara Woof in *Naxos Revisited*, Wende Bartley (*The Handless Maiden*), Alice Ping Yee Ho (*Wolf Woman*) and Sandy Moore (*Echoes of Time Weeping*) are formidable.

They include extended vocal techniques — wails, moans, tongue clicks and rolls, syllabic stutters, bird-like trills and calls — as well as sustained singing over her entire range at a pianissimo level for well over 10 minutes. Jackson effortlessly switches tone, colour and volume from the intensely quiet and crystalline purity of her cloud-piercing high notes to a full, powerful, operatic soprano.

I doubt there is another singer in Canada who could do it. Certainly not one who can for so long grip our attention in a chemical-like bond as Jackson does with her dramatic focus on the action of these theatrical works. She roams the stage confronting the devils which torment the women she portrays, her singing expressively fused to her body language.

Naxos Revisited features *Ariadne*, the Greek princess who gave Theseus the thread that helped him escape the labyrinth on Minos after killing the Minotaur. On the way home from Crete, he abandoned Ariadne on the island of Naxos.

The Handless Maiden wanders the underworld after her father chops off her hands in forfeit to the Devil. She begins in Bartley's opera by reading the story to us out of a book, but then begins to enact it in front of us.

In *Wolf Woman* a mad woman conjures up a real wolf from a skeleton of bones she has collected, which suddenly comes to life and transforms into a beautiful woman.

Echoes of Time Weeping is a tale of a poor woman who bears two sons to a wandering knight, who decides to take them with him on his return to Spain. She drowns the children then suffers agonies of remorse as she searches for their souls.

The musical accompaniment for three of these operas is on tape. In *Wolf Woman*, Jackson plays a percussion score on bongos, rattles, a half-dozen pieces of metal hung like wind chimes, a bucket of water and a three-metre length of galvanized steel chain.

She integrates vocalizations, gesture and instrumental sound with flawless virtuosity.

To achieve the kind of seamless performance Jackson accomplishes in *Wolf Moon* requires not only an extraordinary degree of technical and instinctual skill, but hours of rigorously disciplined practice sustained by years of healthy singing.

We are privileged to see the foundation of her technique in *Naxos Revisited* where she lies prone upon a long cupboard used for storing the Dunn theatre's black backdrops. As she sings from this difficult position, we can watch the way her entire upper torso becomes a bellows, bulging with air, even (and especially, perhaps) when the sounds coming from her voice are tiny, extremely high, and hypnotically soft and pure. It's an object lesson for singers.

The decision of Jackson and director Linda Moore to stage *Wolf Moon* with the audience seated on stage creates a raw theatrical magic. Leigh Ann Vardy's lighting scheme not only anchors the action but colours it, integrating the elements of the performance, not just mechanically, but as yeast integrates flour and sugar and water in making bread.

Wolf Moon, a Vocalypse production, runs nightly through Sunday at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$20.

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Janice Jackson integrates vocalizations, gesture and instrumental sound with flawless virtuosity in *Wolf Moon* at the Dunn Theatre through Sunday. (PETER PARSONS / Staff)