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**Jason: Concerning both the failure and
the magic of Chance**

An inside view of the chamber opera
Jason and Medea / Black enshrouds Red

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Jason as a musical principle

The silhouette of failure belongs to the as yet unclouded picture of departure. Somebody is setting off to realise his dream. The destination is far away: it is a horizontal dream-vision with a magnetic attraction. *Jason* sets off with a power that is shrouded in the aura of a victor. He is the propagandist of his own idea: he needs the far-away Golden Fleece in order to recover his kingdom. He is the great communicator who succeeds in unifying the heroes of his age under his command. He draws them into his great plan. But he will reach the dark Colchis, the edge of the world, only with the help of the gods. It is up to *Medea* to give him her support in times of distress. He wins the Fleece only with the help of others. But after the glorious departure follows the gradual downfall. The conquest of the Fleece, the journey home, and his arrival in Greece form a spiral of catastrophe. Jason becomes a synonym for the imperfect and broken hero. Superficially the meaning of this figure does not lie in the gesture of departure alone. Concealed within the ambivalence of his fate, in his radiant beginning and in the darkness of his failure, there lies a Utopian power, giving present-day man an opportunity of catharsis in the form of self-examination.

These reflections are the result of a long artistic analysis on my part, since 1990, of the myth of the Argonauts. The figure of Jason was at first in the foreground of my interest. Later, however, it was the conflict between him and *Medea* that became the focus of my attention during the actual genesis of my chamber opera.

The moment of failure was to become the central musical gesture. In addition, one question in particular concerned me: Can the moment of disaster also contain an element of Utopia, no matter how small? The intention of the music was to pinpoint the moments of departure, failure and disintegration, as well as the attempt to develop a pre-formed idea, so that only one gesture evolves which serves both as the main means of expression and also as a formal, structural element.

You can find a similar procedure in some works of Stravinsky. For example, in his "*Rite of Spring*" short melodic or rhythmic events form something like "gestural cells" which develop irregularly, and not in a systematic way as they do in Messiaen. They will then unite to form larger, superior structures. Hence the idea of a "gestural model" becoming a general principle of structure.

I should like to give voice to some more ideas in this direction: In an age that generally encourages indifference, in which depth of meaning pales into insignificance, I am starting to trust ever more the old-fashioned methods of design. I am thinking of the idea of a "motive" - not in any academic sense, more in a loose and generous form. Purely technical solutions to problems of design, fascinating as they may indeed be, nevertheless tread a path of error. They create emptiness and a feeling of desolation. Motive and gesture have a much deeper relationship. Their combined strength can, on occasion, lead almost magically to a core of being. Both are aiming at something totally basic. They are the distillation of an idea, of an internal urge. In his *'Six memos for the next millennium'*, Harvard lectures which he planned in 1986 shortly before his death, Italo Calvino talks about the *mot juste* as a sudden brainwave, in which ideas that lie far apart, both in time and space, manage to be united in one verbal phrase. Both cases - the "musical gesture" and the "mot juste" - are concerned with the "search for a unique, pregnant, clearly articulated and memorable turn of phrase".

My String-Quartet, entitled "*Jason Study*", written in 1991, was the first phase. Two fragments of unfinished older pieces formed the basis of this composition. The torsos of a string trio and a quartet, both of them unfinished, were slotted into each other. The piece starts off with a metaphor of power, like a symbol of departure. In the course of this String Quartet the whole consistency of this symbol begins to melt away - just as a *fata morgana* does when it is observed more intensely - because Jason reaches his destination more by blind chance than by any deed of his own, and only with the help of the mythical ship Argo, his mythical companions, and a woman that he has not been searching for. That's why this musical figure will gradually change from being strong and powerful, only to enter a dreamlike state, becoming less and less defined, and finally fading away...

The main constituents of this figure are in a constant flux. Once they have settled down they start to mutate in an irregular fashion. Principles of order exist only fragmentarily and spasmodically. If they apply at all, then only to the "here and now". The effervescence of the beginning has been reduced to a few short convulsive jerks. The moments of decay and falling apart gradually take on a structural significance. In the course of its appearance the metaphor of Power will gradually be subjected to a process of reduction and "burn-out" and eventually become a mirror image of its original gestural power.

The composition entitled *Jason Essay* for seven players which was written two years later in 1993, marked the second phase in my approach to the myth of the Argonauts. The piece opens with a prologue played by the three strings, which was composed after the *Essay* and which puts the whole concept into a dramatic light. The prologue is much more than an introduction. It is more like a

profile of the dying Jason, a depiction in sound of his death-agony. The introduction ends with a soft beat on the bass-drum. The main movement opens with a loud, then subsiding action on the same instrument. The scene begins. A story told in fragments will now be recounted, a fictitious tale about Jason. The basic sound of the work for string-quartet is still present, but in the *Essay* it seems to be illuminated by a hard beam of light that symbolizes the contrast between departure and disaster. The torso of an unfinished piano-piece also intrudes into this composition. Its formal conception derives from an imagined three-part scherzo, the third part representing a free recapitulation. Comparable to a hollow form, the three part structure *vehement - calm - vehement* anticipates the later scenic structure of the opera, in which the proportions of the dramatic conception become inverted.

About the magic world of chance

The composition *Jason Essay* ended, surprisingly with a number. The number *eleven*: regarded as "impure" by the Christians, the Arabs named it the "silent" number, and in the tarot it represents both a "path" and "decision".

There is a connection between the myth of Jason and the symbolic number that represents a path, which may be a coincidence, but for me it nevertheless a remarkable one. Jason is the searcher who reaches his destination, having been led by chance or by events which are external and not influenced by himself. In the end the Golden Fleece doesn't bring him any luck because he is not able to tread this path on his own terms. He will reach the place where Light and Hades come together only with the help of the sons of the gods and the sorceress Medea. The penetration of the magic world of chance into Jason's plan will gradually sap his energy and eventually lead to his failure.

The number *eleven* really did creep into the composition "by chance" and in a most powerful manner. There was no premeditated plan and this amazing coincidence was discovered only after completing the piece. This number rules the dimensions, the duration and also the decisive dramaturgical moments, even individual musical events, and - last but not least, in an uncanny way - the date of completing the score. (I outlined parts of the composition on a train journey. On the 22nd of March in 1993, the train was late and stopped at a small station. Only for that reason did I look at my watch: it was 11.11pm and I finished the sketch. This gave me the idea of looking for other connections between the number 11 and my piece. The prologue and all the corrections were completed on the 11th of June in the same year.)

Here now is short list of some further strange connections between this number and my piece:

▷

Duration of the Essay

7 mins. 42 sec. = 7,7 mins. = $7 \times 1,1$

▷

approximately every eleven bars you will find there is a new section or a new sound colour. Sometimes this works out exactly, sometimes it varies by one bar.

▷

Duration of the prologue: 121 seconds = 11×11

▷

The result of the total bar numbers of Prologue and Essay is 209.

That is 19×11 , or the sum of the digits $2 + 0 + 9 = 11$.

▷

During the last part of the Essay a beat of a hammer on a plate of metal sounds 11 times.

None of these events were planned, but were discovered afterwards. In this case the composer was led forward by "productive coincidence", just as Jason was.

The intrusion of magic into Jason's world seemed to me to be typical of the conflict to which this figure is exposed. In the interpretation of the rational Greeks or occidental people in general, the word "magic" conjures up a feeling of both mystery and barbarism. It is an intuitive power which belongs to an older world, the world of Medea. The basic feeling in this conflict will be one of strangeness. Thinking back, it is not exaggerated to say that the conception of the opera was based on those very ideas.

Naturally these ideas about my own composition are partly a result of critical and analytical reflections, not only during the compositional process itself but also in the years following completion of the whole cycle.

About the chamber opera

With the completion of the *Jason-Essay* the plan to create a scenic version of the mythic material was beginning to take shape in my mind. The structural gesture, which had been developed in the two compositions about Jason, made the next step of now transforming the material into a stage version seem inevitable. The *Essay* would play an important role in shaping the opera, parts of which would form a kind of framework or supply the basic material.

The fundamental idea was not to write a typical opera with a traditional plot. Amongst all imaginable views on this ambiguous myth which have been handed down in many variations and versions, only one was to assert itself from the fragmentarily drafted scenes. An interpretation seen from a present-day point of view will necessarily be a subjective one and I shall come back to this later.

The selection of the texts, sometimes more a chance discovery of the internal relationships to the subject matter than a systematic procedure, turned into a collage of different fragments: Homer *Odyssey*, Ovid *Metamorphoses* (7th canto), Euripides *Medeia*, Grillparzer *Medea*, poems by Trakl (*The Heart and Sleep*) and *omoitsutsu*, which is a "waka" by the Japanese poetess, Ono no Komachi, who lived in the middle ages.

The first performance of the chamber opera took place during a project entitled "Six Days of Opera" on March 15th 1996 at the Tafelhalle in Nuremberg, and was performed by the New Music Theatre of Erlangen.

Singing and speaking as diametrically opposed worlds

The subject of the *chamber opera* is the feeling of strangeness that occurs between people of different cultures. For Jason and Medea the problems of trying to understand a strange and different culture were to end in a catastrophe. In our present multi-cultural world, where seemingly archaic demarcation and animosity continue to exist simultaneously, this conflict is just one of many important subjects that affect us day after day. This is one explanation for the strange title *Jason ~~and~~ Medea*. The crossed out "and" symbolizes the insoluble conflict in which both are fatefully involved.

The feeling of strangeness towards one another was the argument for using two different types of articulation for each of the actors. Singing and speaking confront each other as if they were two different worlds. Jason the Greek speaks, and Medea, the strange and incomprehensible woman, sings. Only when both are dying in Greece, when the survival and identity of Medea is at stake, is the woman from Colchis on the same level as Jason for a few moments. Her singing loses its colour and her outrage causes the melodic line to degenerate into disjointed speech.

The chamber opera is made up of three scenic sketches. The term "sketches" best conveys the fragmental character of the work. The three sections outline the decisive moments in the involved plot of the Golden Fleece.

In the **first scene** (text by Homer and Ovid) a *narrator* appears who leads us into the story but who also gets more involved himself in the course of his narration. *Medea* is shown as a young woman. Her nature is both strange and fascinating. She appears as a sorceress who, being in close contact with the earthly matriarchal deity, is endowed with supernatural powers and is able to bring the dead back to life with the help of her trinitarian goddess. For the Greek man the whole barbaric and incomprehensible strangeness of Medea's personality is demonstrated by these abilities. A dominant sound in this scene is the noise of running water, as a symbol of ritual and transformation.

The **second scene** (fragments of Medea-Dramas by Euripides and Grillparzer) is central and where the main action takes place. The first and third scenes relate to the second as if they were prologue and epilogue, since they are more static and reflective. The second part depicts the agony of both characters. Jason must marry again in order to become King of Greece a second time. With deliberation and also in a state of confusion caused by the strangeness of his wife, and perhaps even by her strong personality, he demands that Medea give up her identity: that she should become a Greek citizen as well as abandon both their sons. When she tries to refuse he rejects her. ...*After the sound of the*

knife the music disintegrates into a series of bends and curves, and a state of imminent excitement, becoming directly a part of the action and closely connected to the words, to a point where Medea is in a gasping rage. We hear splinters of sound beneath the hacked out chords of the piano which are played 13 times. A symbol of death.

Medea kills her children and Jason is crushed.

The **third scene** (text by Homer, by a Japanese poet and Georg Trakl) is both a review and also the final stage. Both characters reflect on their love. Medea does this in a strange language, Japanese, with a touch of the enlightenment that comes with distance: that there might be another possibility after disaster after all. Jason, grown old and lying under the wreck of his ship Argo, reminisces with grief, but he does not really understand. For a moment a hallucination in sound of a young woman's picture appears, then comes the agony. *Black enshrouds Red.*

The metaphor of *Black enshrouding Red* is an essential part of the title. The opera opens and ends in the version of the first performance with a quotation from Homer's *Odyssey*: "and out of the sea death will come..." Black is the colour of death. Black enshrouds red, the colour of blood, of life and love, and out of the sea death will come.

Let us now return to the two worlds of the piece. The musical gesture of Jason was described in detail with the help of the two studies which were composed before the opera. The sphere of Medea has another character. In connection with the *Jason Essay* I spoke about the influence of chance on the plan of the piece and which can be seen as a level of "intuitive productivity". Not in a technical or aleatoric sense, but more as a hidden converging of relationships, or as an effect of magic powers - a concept that is strange and incomprehensible to the rational European or to the dialectically thinking Greek.

Medea's level of expression is that of *singing*. (The part of Medea is composed for soprano). The strangeness and inscrutability of this woman, which fascinates Jason so much, is mirrored in her singing. In the first scene Medea is conveyed in the same way as she must have impressed the young Greek. The witch-like nature of this strange woman is revealed in the magic scene in the middle of the first sketch. We are witness to a ritual act. Medea is in contact with the powers of Earth and Hades. She is a daughter of Hecate, goddess of the Shadow World, and related to Helios, who lends her his dragon-drawn carriage for her nocturnal excursion. She chants in a language which is only comprehensible to the initiated (based on the phonetic components of the Latin text of the 7th canto from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). The magical stage-set is supported by the sounds of springs and brooks. The sounds of nature, instruments and her voice combine to produce an enchanted scene. Time no longer takes a linear course, but

seems sometimes to stop, only to proceed again imperceptibly. Time is in Limbo, divorced from normal dimensions.

The different sounds of water were recorded by myself using a hand-microphone: whispering rivulets coming out of hidden springs in the so-called Franconian Switzerland, which is an area north of Nuremberg, and the cascades of the Urach-Falls near Reutlingen in Swabia. The idea was that these sounds should gradually create a kind of "water dome", enveloping both the stage and the audience, coming out of eight loudspeakers that are distributed over the whole area. (Because of a low budget this could only be partially realised - a problem that is typical for free-lance theatre-groups.)

In the myth of Jason and Medea liquid is something special. Water is the place of Transfer, which itself signifies "departure into the unknown". Blood means life. Medea casts spells with blood: the cut-up pieces of sacrificial animals are cooked in a cauldron and then brought to life again. Dismemberment is a special theme of this whole myth. For example, Medea cut her brother Apsyrtos into pieces while fleeing after the rape of the Golden Fleece. She incites the daughters of Pelias to ritual murder and Pelias is also chopped to pieces. In the genealogical prehistory, which plays an important role in the whole question of guilt, the dismemberment of human bodies and the cooking of them is a recurring theme. In the opera the vehement objection of the speaker during No. 8 of the first scene refers to the murder of Pelias while Medea is slaughtering the sacrificial animal to rejuvenate Jason's father Aetes.

Medea's main interval is that of the fifth. Her connection with this interval is at first concealed. In the magic scene, which is No. 8 of the first scene, the notes *d-a* form a frame of reference, but this is only perceptible to insiders. At first we hear the initial note *d*, then the second note *a* becomes the central tone, after 55 very long bars. This could not have been foretold by listeners in the audience. At later points the fifth seems to be aimlessly interspersed among the intervals which follow, but it latches onto significant parts of the text, such as the words *gold* or *heart*. The second scene opens with an unstable, hovering fifth, which the vibraphone plays as a tremolo. The interval gradually changes its timbre, becoming clouded over and signifying a transfer from the distant Colchis to the hard world of Greece. Medea cannot find her notes. The situation leaves her speechless. During the Agony the interval of the fifth is represented much more prominently by the deformed figure of the tritone, or by both the minor second plus tritone and vice versa. In the third scene, at the moment of remembrance of her former lover, the singing reverts to the perfect interval again.

The interval of the instrumental figure of Jason is the major seventh, derived from the number 11, which symbolises the hero searching in vain. In the prologue of the first scene this characteristic interval is already prominent.

The speech of Jason the Greek, performed by an actor, is in sharp contrast to the aura-like articulation of the sorceress Medea. The role of the actor was conceived in such a way that he is to appear on stage in the first scene as a narrator who leads us into the story. For a while he remains at a distance. Then in the second scene he eventually emerges as Jason, playing this role until the end of the opera. Jason, who is unable to sing, remains captive in his world of speech.

The spoken texts have a very controlled character. Where it is important the rhythm of the speech has been exactly determined. The intention here is to make the words sound fixed in verse-form, in the same way as Jason is locked within his own fate. Often the time-frame is exactly determined where a certain part of the text has to be recited. The spoken text is thus given a definite shape, and the arbitrariness, which unfortunately occurs so often amongst actors and directors, is restricted to a minimum. Detailed expression marks concerning gestures occasionally indicate how the role should be developed, so that the dramatic ductus is set from the beginning. With a few exceptions the time parameters controlling the role of the speaker have been composed quite rigidly, but he nevertheless still has a certain amount freedom of interpretation.

The sound world in which the speaker operates is characterised by a sense of brokenness. The main gestures of departure and disintegration, derived from the String Quartet, gradually shift their emphasis more and more towards the phase where everything becomes crushed and fades away. The world of Jason is fragile and unstable - an expression of his own weakness. If he once seems to be strong, for example at the beginning of the second scene, it nevertheless has the effect of being hollow and is not really very convincing.

Medea always begins to sound like Jason when her own identity is in danger. She sings with a "broken voice", a form of articulation which tends more towards *Sprechgesang*, when she admits to having incited the daughters of Pelias to ritual murder out of love for Jason. The melodic line moves together with the orchestra in unison. The single cut-off notes in the voice-part are taken up by the instruments and prolonged, transferred outside of Medea's body, only to become spatially distorted in different octave-transpositions. Medea is no longer quite herself at this moment.

This passage occurs at the beginning of the second scene, when Jason demands that she becomes a Greek woman among Greeks. At first she is shocked

and reacts defensively, then, pretending to be subservient, she tries to change the mind of this man who is simply playing his trump cards.

The curve of the dramatic action can be extracted from the shape of the voice-part. Medea, having escaped from her home and being therefore divorced from her traditional background, approaches Jason's world of expression for a short moment. Their relationship has reached its lowest ebb. Once the decision has been made the black side of Medea's character will make itself felt in a most dreadful way. She will then turn into the ferocious, strange woman with her own foreign way of expressing herself. At this point Jason falls silent.

Space and Movement

The movement through the vocal spectrum corresponds to the overall conception of movement, as it was originally planned. There are two contrary processes. The movement of the speaker (Jason) moves from exterior to interior. In the second scene his area of movement becomes even more restricted, culminating in paralysis and the moment of agony at the end of the opera. Medea starts at the centre of the stage and drifts gradually towards the periphery. The moment when the curves overlap is identical to the struggle of both figures. Physically, two potentials of energy collide with a destructive power. The Medea-Power turns out to be stronger. When Jason finally reaches the centre of the stage this also signifies his end.

(Unfortunately this idea was not realised during the production. Today in Germany directors often have a habit of ignoring the ideas of composers on principal. A lot of directors come from the field of drama and have had no practical experience with opera, modern music or composition. Mostly they have no feeling for musical processes. For them music is just part of the "props". This may be the reason for such wide-spread ignorance that composers complain about so much. No honest musician would have the cheek to interpret a piece of music in the way these directors do.)

Dramatic use of the sounds of nature

Each scene has its own particular sound taken from nature. In the first scene water is the dominant sound. I have spoken about this in another context. In the second scene you hear the sound of scythes which are being sharpened or beaten. (Originally the use of knives was planned, but the resulting sound was not very satisfactory. To get the proper effect we would have had to use huge sabres or swords, which would have been dangerous. By coincidence the conductor of the New Music Theatre in Erlangen possessed a rusty old scythe that was a family heirloom, and which had exactly the right sonority to set your teeth on edge. The sound was complemented by a really martial effect on stage, when four musicians stand up and whet or beat their scythes.)

The third scene is characterised by the sound of the breaking of wooden sticks.

The unpleasant, shrill and piercing sound of the scythe is used at the moment when Jason decides to take away his children from Medea. This is a death-sentence for his sons. Medea's vengeance takes its terrible course.

In the last scene the breaking of small wooden sticks symbolically marks the end. The old Jason lies under the wreck of his ship Argo. Medea breaks the

wood. The sound of this final scene is very thin in contrast to the vehement struggle before. The scene now turns into an epilogue. The dying love of both, which is a concrete fact, is hinted at by an abstract form of expression. In terms of composition this means a subtle reference to the world of East-Asian aesthetics, in which abstract ideas suggest concrete facts. The singing of Medea hovers between fragments of tonal fields (the whole-tone scale and the range of a fifth; whether obvious or concealed, the fifth is the interval of Medea). The remembrance of a bygone love is also expressed in a Japanese poem, which is alternately sung in German and in the original language. In a faltering voice Jason manages to utter a few broken words:

Jason: Das wilde Herz ward weiß
 O dunkle Angst des Todes
 dein verlornen Schatten im Abendroth
 eine zerfetzte Fahne vom Blut rauchend

...zuletzt wird außer dem Meer kommen der Tod...

Visions of pain accompany his death. The two worlds can never be joined together.