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A POET'S VOICE

An appreciation of the art of Diamanda Galas

Diamanda Galas' voice hits you with the unmitigated impact of a natural phenomenon. First, there is the awe and wonder of the immediate experience. Afterwards, in the safety of your own thoughts, you try to explain it, to comprehend the mystery of its force. As I have tried, over the years, to explain to myself the grip that Galas' voice has on my psyche, I keep recognizing processes at play similar to those that we encounter in the appreciation of modern poetry; it is the grip of the poetic. And this happens, precisely, because Galas' quest for musical expression in the songs that she performs parallels the quest of the modern poet for an authentic voice in the poem. This is true both of her original song creations (i.e. her own lyrics, such as "Judgment Day", or the poems of others, such as "Abel et Cain" by Baudelaire, set to her own music) and her song re-creations (i.e. songs written by others, such as Screamin' Jay Hawkins' "I put a spell on you," or the Supremes hit "My world is empty without you", and musically re-imagined by Galas.)

It is true that in a Diamanda Galas concert what grabs you first is the dramatic element. The staging of the lone piano, the solemn lighting, the deliberate steps of her entrance, the black fitted attire, the long countenance, the long black hair, the initial pounding of the keys and the shriek, the shriek that is directed at the gods, you would think. For all I know, she could be the protagonist of an ancient Greek drama. She could be Antigone or Electra! But that's the extent of the drama, all being experienced in the concert's initial moments. The thing that carries you to the end, for the next hour or two, though, is the poetic and vocal power of Galas' musical re-imagining of old song numbers (familiar blues songs, ballads, and negro spirituals) and of her striking own musical creations.

Which is exactly the case every time you sit down to listen to her recordings, as I am doing at the writing of this.

In our times, songs are composed on a musical instrument exploring ranges of expression that are limited by the physical constraints of the instrument (the register one gets from a particular shape and a particular material, the musical scale of ordered frequencies.) Diamanda Galas, on the other hand, uses the instrument of the voice and its unique versatility, part matter (the body's breathing cavity, the vocal chords), part spirit (what we call the singer's soul), to push past the perceived physical order of the song ("to put a fist through the wall" as she puts it in an interview). With it, she digs deep into the subsurface of emotion in order to extract its raw essence and by doing so to give the song immediacy, much as the modernist poets upended the metered line, the rhyme, centuries of formality in the poem, in order to get at the complexities of feeling in the midst of a rapidly evolving and disorienting century. And so, for these poets, began the stripping of language, the removal of its gilded clothing down to the bare word that transmits with exactitude the feeling; and so began the breaking of the poetic line, blown to pieces from the internal explosions of the self under tremendous pressure from the outside; and so began the word's re-branding, to name the new out of the old, to "Make it new!" as Ezra Pound proclaimed. Great and abrupt external upheavals at the turn of the 20th century (momentous breakthroughs in science and technology, and devastating World Wars and revolutions) prompted the artists' internal revolt and their strong desire to violently break with the past. For Diamanda Galas, the great external upheaval, that informed her artistic rebellion, was the AIDS epidemic which hit her world at the beginning of her artistic journey as abruptly and with equal menace as the previous world wars.

Diamanda Galas chooses to re-create songs of loss, despair, protest and, yes, love. In a song, the atmosphere of the language, the song's lyrics, permeates the measured musical space maintaining a mood rather than voicing a feeling at its truest. Here, Galas intervenes to interject into the melodic line the actual sound of the raw human feeling

which was only imagined by the poetry of the lyric. In the American song tradition, this has been manifested before in the blues songs (especially as heard in some early field recordings) and even in a few re-interpretations of the blues in early rock-and-roll. Galas takes it several notches further and, literally, higher! She breaks the melodic line with the many elements from the trove of her voice. From the varied shriek to the deep guttural, from the voice projectile to an inverted sound that seems to be directed to the interior of the self, from snippets of laughter and cry, placed like land mines in a field of words, to the matter-of-fact half song, half spoken pronouncement. In the end, the song has been transformed. It no longer resides in the permanent emotional address where our collective memory had placed it. It now speaks to the moment and it speaks to the ages: be it the ravages of wars and epidemics, be it a beloved person's loss or the cruelty of history and of the state.

I am listening to a Galas recording of "My world is empty without you." As the verse alternates so is the voice, in rapid succession. From the painful cry of loss to the tenderness of remembrance. Each time, I am drawn to that sweet tenderness as registered in the timbre of a young woman's voice at the point of breaking, and I cannot help but recall a similar moment of tenderness in the poetry of e.e. cummings:

*if there are any heavens my mother will (all by herself) have
one. It will not be a pansy heaven nor
a fragile heaven of lilies-of-the-valley but
it will be a heaven of blackred roses*

(e.e. Cummings, Poems 1923-1954, p. 253, Harcourt Brace & World Inc., NY 1954)

I am listening to another track that begins with a bang and not with a whimper, as the poet would have it. "The thrill is gone." The dreadful realization of loss, the magnitude of it, its incomprehension, expressed in a tsunami of a scream, followed by the emotive melodic words that soon turn inward, garbled, nearly muted by a feeling of suffocation,

and then back to the despair of the scream, with liberating, perhaps, effects now. It brings to mind a parallel dead-end of despair and exasperation at the incomprehension of the order of things that one finds in the poetry of Paul Celan and it is expressed in equal measures of thought introversion and of screaming:

WHERE?

At night in crumbling rockmass.

*In trouble's rubble and scree,
in slowest tumult,
the wisdom-pit named Never.*

*Water needles
stitch up the split
shadow—it fights its way
deeper down,
free.*

(Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan, translated by John Felstiner, p. 265, WW Norton, NY, 2001)

Then there is the matter-of-fact delivery of the “Iron lady” and of the “25 minutes to go” songs. Listening to them I recall a similar tone of mastered conveyance of feeling and of thought as in the poem “As much as you can” by the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy:

*And if you can't shape your life the way you want,
at least try as much as you can*

not to degrade it

by too much contact with the world,

by too much activity and talk.

(C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherard.

Edited by G. Savidis, Revised edition, Princeton University Press, 1992.)

In these songs, the singer subjugates the melody to the gravity of the subject matter, bringing it closer to the rhythms and patterns of the spoken word in order to make you hear the stark pronouncement clear and unadorned. It is the diction in the last Cantos of Ezra Pound, the distillation of bitter experience, so to speak, the final word. Listen:

In meiner Heimat

where the dead walked

and the living were made of cardboard.

(“from Canto CXV”)

(Ezra Pound, *Drafts & Fragments of Cantos CX-CXVII*, New Directions, NY, 1968)

In her search for the authentic in her art, Diamanda Galas weds her daring imagination to the variegated elements of her voice in a feat similar to the poets of modernity in the early 20th century, who revived and redefined poetry as they searched for authenticity of expression. T.S. Eliot in the *Waste Land*, perhaps the most iconic poem of 20th century modernism, upended the traditional techniques of composition by employing, in free verse, a collage of original lines, quoted speech and literary references, and disjointed

images in rapid succession. Ezra Pound, similarly, interjected swaths of historical fact—many times in a foreign language, such as Chinese, German, French, Latin and Greek—amidst lyrical passages, aiming at the shock of the juxtaposition. Finally, e.e. cummings attacked the look of the poem itself, breaking up and interrupting words on the page, re-assembling them in unfamiliar ways, giving a visual, a physical presence to the word. Galas’ interventions on the modern song, parallels the efforts of these modernist poets.

A song is composed in order to tell a story and to convey feelings about the story told. These could be feelings of joy and of celebration, of love, of longing, of anger and of frustration. In the musical song tradition, conveying these feelings relies on employing time-tested correspondences of feeling and of scales and keys (major, minor etc.) Ultimately, though, the aim of the song is to please (whether it is joyful, angry, or sad), so that the listener will find it attractive enough to repeat it (this becomes even more pertinent in the era of mass commercialization and profit.) And here lies the fundamental difference between the generally accepted definition/concept of a song and the songs that Galas is offering us. Her song, its blasting power, its piercing intensity, its graveness at times, does not aim at pleasing, on the contrary, it aims at unsettling. It wants to draw you close enough, that one time, so that you can see for yourself how it truly feels inside, and not to be fooled by the advertising billboards of manufactured feelings. And in doing so, Diamanda Galas is certainly redefining the nature of the song in our times, and people who know are taking notice.