



Indifference and the longing for order

First of all, I have a truly shameful confession to make: I love watching talent shows—the more unequivocal the jury's opinions, the better. On RTL, it's "Italiener haben einfach mehr Gefühl, nä!"; on SRF "Du hesch de Blues im Bluet"; on M6 France "tu m'as ébloui avec ton timbre, Vanessa". That aside, the participants in these singing contests frequently exhibit marvellous talent, even for my classically trained ears.

But there's another reason I'm fascinated by the courtroom-like atmosphere of these shows. In an age of generalised cultural indifference, you feel in them a longing for a clear categorisation that separates sensational from abysmal, sensitive from raunchy, cool from fragile, sexy from elfin. Entire swathes of the population are swept along by it all: they vote and tweet for all their worth, quite often choosing a Puccini aria full of portamenti as the winner, and look forward eagerly to the cosmetic surgery that the victors' brief career will immediately entail.

The remarkable thing is that these days we lack such unambiguous yardsticks; the concept of culture is breaking down and has drained away into countless side alleys of the districts where the educated bourgeoisie used to live. Perhaps, today, it describes lifeworlds rather than actual systems of cultural value for money.

So this year, the enjoyable yet challenging work of the Federal Music Jury, which I have now had the honour of chairing for the second time, had to begin with agreement on the purpose and form of our work. Once we had received the 50 or so submissions from the independent panel of experts, each of the seven members of our jury asked themselves: what are we listening to, what can we hear? What personal lifeworld does the music tell us about? Are there deliberate mixings of style—alloys, as it were—that, like earthen sound-tracks, lead us back to the musicians' landscapes? What space do we grant to sheer virtuosity, that time-honoured proof of quality? What happens when individuals who radiate self-confidence come up against others, more unassuming, who stand on the sidelines and hint at their shadowy work processes, often faltering or almost falling silent?

What is the role of contact with the audience, or of outreach in the work of the Swiss musicians proposed to us? How do the different generations present their attitudes in a world where graceful art meets unashamed trash (both of which, incidentally, can be found as much in older as younger artists)?

And before we knew it, a new value system that hardly merits the description emerged from our work as jurors: as we listened, discussed, shared and deliberated together, our (value) judgments repeatedly flickered and flared up. We rephrased, defended, debated, occasionally nodded in harmony and applauded, frequently going back to first assessments, then looking forward again, before finally coming back to the basic questions: What is music for our country? What is our country for music?

When you listen to the music of our nominees, you will perhaps sense something of our constant openness to new forms of evaluation (a ghastly term). Thanks to its evanescence, music is almost impossible to pigeonhole. Despite—or perhaps because of—that, all the jury members once again learnt a great deal, mostly about musical genres that were not necessarily part of their personal origins and—an unexpected pleasure—about themselves!

Now that our work is done, all that remains for the jury is to offer our sincerest congratulations to fifteen wonderful Swiss musicians, composers, experimental, wild, almost ungovernable sound artists

and audio virtuosi, some focused, some anything but: not just on their nomination but also on their music, which refuses to be constrained by binary oppositions.

Graziella Contratto