

Why Black? Why Red? Joan La Barbara and Rolf Julius' 'dots'

Since the early '80s, and for the rest of his life, Rolf Julius nurtured a dream. He believed in the possibility of translating images into sound (at first, they were just doodles, then they became red and black 'dots'), and he was certain that the best expression of this mode of interpretation – by the way, already experimented over the years by other performers – would have been possible only for the great American vocalist Joan La Barbara.

He met her in Berlin in 1979, where she had a DAAD residency and, ever since, they started seeing each other frequently, especially during 1983, in New York, where Julius was an artist-in-residence for a year at PS1. However, he never got to see a public performance of Joan on his 'dots', for a number of reasons, mainly relating to organizational issues. This kind of artistic experience isn't exactly mainstream, and this one in particular: it is hard to find a suitable space, capable of hosting the great scores Julius had been composing since the '90s. That is, a museum-like space, rather than the 'usual' auditorium.

Various attempts were made, especially in Europe, but to no avail. I myself tried to bring his dream to life, and I was close enough at least once; when I started working on this project, Julius was still alive, and he followed its progress with great anticipation. After his passing at the beginning of 2011, I made it my primary goal to succeed in this endeavour, I absolutely wanted to make it, to dedicate it to the memory of this great artist, with whom I was fortunate enough and honoured to be friends and collaborator for many years.

Eventually, in December 2012 in Italy, at the Castello di Rivoli (the Rivoli Castle), in the biggest hall of the Museum, some large pieces by Rolf Julius were mounted, and Joan La Barbara (who accepted with great enthusiasm, in the name of the friendship that they shared), for the first time ever, improvised on the 'dots', creating hitherto unheard sounds, which seemed to come from the images themselves.

On the morning of December 15th 2012, during the rehearsal, Joan had prepared something, a rough outline of her performance. Nevertheless, that night, when - shortly after 9 pm - she started singing, I had the immediate impression that she was executing new movements in the space between the three works/scores, and that the concert was turning into something wholly unanticipated, even for her. Her attention seemed directed towards different areas of each score, and they were not the same ones she had explored in the morning, so one had the impression that nothing had been exceedingly planned, and that what was taking place, was actually a genuine improvisation (or better yet, an *improvised composition*). After greeting the audience, Joan turned her back to it, concentrating her attention on the 'dots', and creating an almost embarrassing situation (not to mention, rather unusual for a concert). But her voice, amplified through the audio system, reached us with strength and clarity, engaging us in her performance.

One had the very distinct feeling that one was witnessing the unprecedented encounter between a person and one or more strange black and red shapes, unfathomable, an encounter where the person acts as the interpreter of a mute yet meaningful entity, which is waiting still, in silence...

Joan gave voice to the black and red spots, which talked/sang through her, and the fact that her back was turned to the audience (especially at the beginning, when she was 'addressing' *Piano Piece nr. 3*) reinforced the feeling that the sounds could really be issuing from those shapes.

One image that stuck in my mind (and which is well documented in the video footage) is one of great strength and vividness: Joan bending towards the 'dots' further down, to better converse with them. This was all very exciting for me – but also for many other spectators that night, I think – like observing a phenomenon one has never seen before. The emotion was palpable (at least, I thought I caught a glimpse of it) in Joan herself. Perhaps, not being able to see her while she was so close to the scores, not being able to see her face if not briefly, now and then – since I was sitting on the floor against the wall on her right – added to the oddity and 'savageness' of the experience: her face was human, recognizable, but the sounds which issued from her had an alien quality to them, they sounded almost non-human.

As she stood in front of *Five Red*, towards the end of the performance, there was a moment when Joan's voice, whilst 'reading' the red signs on the right side of the work, reached its greatest power and intensity, and held onto them for several seconds, maybe almost a minute, and then stopped abruptly, as if suddenly cut off. This interruption was followed by a brief but very intense silence, almost violent, and comparable, in strength, to the sound that had preceded it: for me – but not only for me, as I learned later – it was the climax of her performance, its peak. I think it was at that

very moment that I realized the goal had been reached, and that our good friend would have appreciated the result of all that work. I think that this video conveys most of the atmosphere of that night, letting those who weren't able to be there share in a unique and one-time event.

Carlo Fossati, 2013 (translated by Valentina Maffucci)