

Katharina Schmitt, Michal Rataj

A Study of Aphasia

Producer: Kateřina Rathouská

Composer and musical director: Michal Rataj

Text and director: Katharina Schmitt

Characters

Patient

Nurse

Doctor

Broadcaster

Choir

Voice

In **A Study of Aphasia**, the protagonist is a singer who loses her voice during an opera performance. Listeners then witness this new world our singer enters in the course of a single night at the hospital. A nurse who is having a difficult night shift tries to make her utter at least a single word using various means. The singer relentlessly refuses. Maybe somewhere deep inside she is looking for a new form of communication...

In his book *Children's Speech and Aphasia* (1918), Emil Fröschels - an Austrian linguist and the founder of speech therapy — describes the relationship between the development of speech in children, speech impediments, and psychology. Inspired by Fröschels' book and a scene from Ingmar Bergman's film *Persona* — in which an actress loses her voice — composer **Michal Rataj** and director/author **Katharina Schmitt** explore the themes of language, speech and voice. The question "Who speaks?" is as important for them as the question "Who does not speak?" and "Who is not heard?"

A Study of Aphasia examines the voice as a fundamental component of human identity. The dramatic framework consists of a situation between a non-verbal and a verbal character, which leads to a whole range of voice manifestations from singing, sprechgesang and whispering to speaking and shouting.

The play also serves as a reaction to political, environmental and social events. The main character no longer believes her work is of any significance in relation to current world problems – her virtuoso singing suddenly seems ridiculous to her. We follow her in the midst of a deep artistic crisis in which she doubts the meaning of art. The resulting sound composition becomes a mirror to her inner world.

1. Loss of Voice

Backstage of an opera house.

Voice (announcement)

The show starts in eight minutes. We kindly ask Electra to go to the stage.

The Patient stands on the stage and sings an aria from Richard Strauss's Elektra.

Patient

Allein! Weh, ganz allein. Der Vater fort,
hinab gescheucht in seine kalten Klüfte.
Agamemnon. Agamemnon.
Wo bist du, Vater? Hast du nicht die Kraft,
dein Angesicht herauf zu mir zu schleppen?

While she sings, the patient has a laughing fit. For a few moments, she pronounces the text of the aria as if she doesn't understand it.

Nur gestern wie ein Schatten dort
im Mauernwinkel zeig dich deinem Kind
Vater Agamemnon ein Tag von Sternen
Stürzt alle Zeit, so wird Blut aus hunderten Kehlen stürzen
dein Grab oder aus Ügen wir
sich ordnen fließ
Schwall
Bachle
Le

Leben

Le

Che

chrrrrr

The Patient's voice disappears, as does the stage on which she performs. Change of space: from the stage to the inside of the head of the Patient.

Music. Sounds.

Nurse

In the hospital, they tell me the patient is a singer and that she's 42 years old. That she suddenly stopped singing during a performance of Elektra. Apparently, she made a grand theatrical gesture, laughed, and looked around. They say this lasted over a minute. Then they took her off the stage. She later explained that everything seemed funny, and she couldn't hold back the laughter. She hasn't spoken since that moment and she barely moves. Tests were useless in establishing any physiological or psychological causes.

I am a nurse. For years I have been working in this hospital. Today, I'm working the night shift. They tell me I look just like the patient. They tell me we could be twins.

2. The Physiological Development of Speech

Music. Sounds.

Patient and Nurse. In the background, we hear the voice of the Doctor from another room, as if delivering a lecture. We hear the Patient`s breath.

Doctor

It might be superfluous today for me to remind you that our supreme spiritual processes rely on the state of the brain. We can best understand this in the process of language development in children. The first cry is an unconscious reflex reaction. In the weeks that follow, the cries can still be understood as a reflex, now brought about by hunger or pain. Later, the cries become a more conscious, intentional act. They are a significant signpost throughout language development.

Nurse

I ask the patient whether she wants another pillow. (*Patient`s breath*)

I tell her she has to rest, her gestures are out of control.

I tell her I will turn on the radio.

The Nurse tunes the radio. We hear an excerpt from an old Czech Radio adaptation of Elektra with Leopolda Dostalová.

Elektra

I am ashamed, oh women,
if ye deem me too impatient
for my oft complaining;
but, since a hard constraint forces me to this,
bear with me. How indeed could any

woman of noble nature refrain,
who saw the calamities of a father's house,
as I see them by day and night continually,
not fading, but in the summer of their strength?

The Patient has a laughing fit.

Nurse

I ask the patient if the play is not to her liking. (*Patient's breath*)

That I was under the impression that she liked Elektra. (*Patient's breath, sounds*)

I explain to the patient that I don't understand art.

But that I think it's very important.

Especially for those who have problems.

That I admire her for doing what she does.

That I could never stand on the stage.

Even though we look alike.

Whether she thinks so too?

I explain to the patient that I am going to change the station.

Radio news.

Broadcaster

The latest flooding in Venice is the worst in fifty years, although generally an elevated water level is normal for the last weeks of autumn in this seaside city. What's known as Acqua Alta, or high water, is a combination of climatic factors typical for this time of year – increased rainfall, rising tides, and the local wind.

The jet streams are also thought to be partially responsible for the flooding: wind currents from both east and west which have a global impact on the weather.

The patient neurotically scratches on wood with her fingernails.

Venice, a city built on wooden piles, which has been fighting floods since its construction, will sink once and for all.

The Nurse switches off the radio.

Nurse

I explain to the patient that she does not have to listen to the radio if the news depresses her.

I say: Stop scratching your nails on the table.

The Patient neurotically scratches on wood with her fingernails.

I say: Of course, I'm interested in what you think.

I say: I'm sure you have something to say about the present state of the world.

I say: Say it!

Music. Sounds.

The Nurse assumes the speaking style of the Doctor. Their voices overlap. The Patient is silent.

Doctor

When we say *aphasia*, we mean a loss of speech.

The articulation exercises are done in front of a triple mirror, so the patient sees not only their own articulators but also the doctor's. They thus get the opportunity to compare. Liebmann's lectures on sibilant impediments contain excellent practice materials.

See, cymbal, sit, city, sip,

must, just, haste, waste,

alas, darts,

smart, smitten, snow, snap, swell,

lease, user, stat,

sleep, snack, soap.

All the consonants are practised in turn – first separately, then in conjunction with the vowels.

Nurse

I say to the patient: I'll help you.

I say: You have to speak.

I say: Syllable after syllable, word after word, sentence after sentence.

You have to know what you want to say.

Don't speak too loud or too quiet.

When you speak, either stand up or sit up straight and with composure.

I say: Before you start speaking, take a deep breath in with your mouth open. Save your breath.

Really lay into the vowels.

When you exhale, do not aim the air at the consonant but at the vowel instead.

Doctor

What matters most is eliminating psychological barriers, particularly fear of speech or difficult speech sounds; exertion during consonant production must be avoided. We have the patients repeat sentences containing long vowels without previous practice. This provides remarkable relief during speech. As soon and often as possible, the patients should speak in the presence of other people.

Nurse

Repeat after me, I say.

Nurse and Doctor

See, cymbal, sit, city,
must, just, haste, waste,
alas, darts, smart, smitten,
snow, snap, swell,
lease, user, stat,
sleep, snack, soap.

Nurse

I say: You're not even trying.

Music. Sounds.

3. Signs of Disease

The Nurse slowly gets irritated as she speaks, coming closer and withdrawing again throughout the scene.

The Patient scratches on wood with her fingernails.

Patient`s breath.

Nurse

I say: We encounter the following signs of the illness: complete sensory aphasia consisting of a loss of comprehension of sounds and thus also of the meaning of words; with disorders of written text comprehension. I ask the patient: Is this your case? (*Patient`s breath, sounds*) Or is it motor aphasia, in which language comprehension is retained but the patient exhibits almost total muteness? Could this be your problem? I ask. (*Patient`s breath, sounds*)

Music.

Patient

Nur gest ern wie ein Schat ten dort
im Mau er wink el zeig dich dein em Kind
Va ter Aga ein Tag men von Ster nen
Stürzt al le Zeit, so wird Blut aus hund ert Keh len stürzen
dein Grab o ie aus Ügen wir
s dn ördrn flies -

Patient`s breath.

Nurse

I say to the patient: You're not even trying.

Are you tired? I ask. *(Patient`s breath)*

Do you want to listen to the radio again?

I'll turn it on, I say.

The Nurse turns the radio on. Patient`s breath.

Broadcaster

Greece has deployed special police forces to Lesbos following conflicts between law enforcement and migrants. Thousands of mostly Afghan asylum seekers attacked the police in the city of Mytilene during protests against the conditions in the island's overflowing refugee camp...

Patient`s voice and breath.

Nurse

I say to the patient: First the radio is switched on, then it s switched off. I say: You're sick and you don't know what you want. What do you think, I ask the patient, what is it that defines your state? What have you actually lost? Why aren't you speaking?

Patient`s voice and breath.

Are you like P., I ask? 32 years old, struck by sudden nausea, he fell to the ground and was unconscious for a short time. He was taken home, where he experienced cramps in the right side of his body, including his facial muscles and headaches. The cramps lasted for several minutes and were followed by a speedy recovery. No disruption to speech functions at

all. Since then, however, the seizures continued. A neurological examination revealed a tumour in the left side of the brain. This was surgically removed. For several days after the operation, he continued to experience cramps and was also completely mute. Further examinations revealed a right-side paralysis of the facial nerve and an almost complete inability to create speech sounds and the bilabial consonant B. I'm asking you: Do you have a brain tumour or not? (*Patient's voice and breath.*)

It's impressive how healthy you are. Impressive how you do nothing. I say: I couldn't stand on the stage. I have nothing to say. I say: And yet we're so alike. I shout: If you think that your reluctance to speak is some form of resistance or a political act, I have to disagree. I say: No one can hear you when your mouth is closed.

Music.

4. Exercises

Music.

The Patient's voice in the background.

Broadcaster (+ Patient)

The latest flooding in Venice is the worst in fifty years. Generally, an elevated water level is normal in the last weeks of autumn in this seaside city. What's known as Acqua Alta, or high water, is a combination of climatic factors of weather typical for this time of year – increased rainfall, rising tides, and the local wind. The jet streams are also thought to be partially responsible for the flooding: wind currents from both east and west which have a global impact on the weather. Venice, a city built

on wooden piles, which has been fighting floods since its construction, will sink once and for all.

Nurse

What are you reading? I ask.

(Patient`s breath)

The Nurse reads:

"Foreword. What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism. In reflecting on its own guilt, therefore, thought finds itself deprived not only of the affirmative reference to science and everyday phenomena but also of the conceptual language of opposition. No terms are available which..."

The Dialectic of Enlightenment. Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno.
You are far too ill to read this! Let's listen to the radio for a bit.

The Nurse switches on the radio.

Broadcaster

Fires in Australia become more dramatic. Thousands of people are fleeing the flames. The fires have raged since October, but the situation is deteriorating. At least seventeen people died yesterday. At least seven deaths, over a quarter of a million households left without electricity: a winter storm has wreaked havoc in the US. Tornadoes have destroyed numerous buildings in several states.

Nurse

I tell the patient she is inaudible. But that everyone wishes to listen to her. You are talented, I say, you're one of the greatest talents of your generation, you started singing at age three, you studied at an elementary arts school, at a conservatoire, and then at an arts university, you won numerous prizes. I say: Who can express themselves better than you?

The Nurse does breathing exercises with the Patient.

Nurse

I say: Breathe with me. First exercise: Take a deep breath in through your nose with your mouth closed, hold the breath for a few seconds, then exhale through your mouth, all at once.

I say: Second exercise. Like the first but let out only a bit of air and press your lips together.

Third exercise, I say: Breathe in slowly and continuously with your lips pursed to create a small slit, hold your breath for a few seconds and then exhale all at once. Then repeat the second exercise to calm the lungs down.

Music.

Patient

Nur gestern wie ein Schatten dort
im Mauernwinkel zeig dich deinem Kind
Vater Agas Tagmen von Sternen
Stürzt alle Zeit, so wird Blut aus hunderten Kehlen stürzen
dein Grab oie aus Ügen wir
s dn ödrn flies -

Music.

Nurse

I say: Fourth exercise. A deep breath in through the nose, hold, then a slow exhalation through tightly closed lips. The neck and nape muscles remain relaxed.

To exercise the diaphragm, we inflate our tummy as much as possible with each inhalation and then draw it in with each exhalation. Fifteen to twenty times in a row, four times a day, I say.

I say: Your silence is deafening.

I say: You're not trying at all. You're refusing to do your duty; you're refusing to sing.

I say: Perhaps your work seems ridiculous to you, perhaps singing has lost its meaning for you. I say: It is you who gives it meaning when you sing.

I ask: What are you doing? What's this supposed to be? I ask: Are you sleeping? I hope you're not sleeping; I say. I say: If you're sleeping, I'll fall asleep too. I say: I look like you, I resemble you, and I can't go on.

The Patient and Nurse fall asleep.

Sounds. Music.

5. These Sheep Shouldn't Sleep in a Shack – The Patient's Dream

The Nurse sings.

Nurse + Chorus

Silly Sally swiftly shooed seven silly sheep.

The seven silly sheep Silly Sally shooed shilly-shallied south.

These sheep shouldn't sleep in a shack.
Sheep should sleep in a shed.

Amidst the mists and coldest frosts,
With stoutest wrists and loudest boasts,
He, hey, ho-hey, hey, he, hey he ho-hey,
He thrusts his fists against the posts,
And still insists he sees the ghosts.

You've no need to light a night-light
On a light night like tonight,
For a night-light's light's a slight light,
To light night-lights with their slight lights
On a light night like tonight.

Patient (*sings*)

O o a oo u o o a

U o e a o a i o a a

U o e e ou e y e ou

Nurse

I work as a nurse.

I am not like you.

Elementary Art School.

Conservatory.

University of the Arts.

Awards.

Further awards.

I want to look at you.

I want to listen to you.
You are hiding yourself; I say.
You are eating me up.
It's morning. My shift is over.

Music.

I say in the hospital that the patient has fully recovered and is capable of speaking without any restrictions. *(music)* I say: The tests revealed nothing, the physical or psychological causes are unclear. *(music)* I say: She does not speak and barely moves, her gestures are completely out of her control, I say that improvement is unlikely. She says nothing, I say. Nothing. *(music)* Who will speak now, I ask in the hospital?

Music. Sounds.

The Patient suddenly starts to dance. We hear her steps (tap dancing).

Nurse

What are you doing?
What is the meaning of this?
Are you tap-dancing?