

Poetics and Politics

On "Epos" (2021) by Filipino composer Jonas Baes

by Nora-Louise Müller

Jonas Baes has been exploring the many traditional musical styles of his home country, the Philippines, for decades and draws particular inspiration for his compositional work from the music of the Mangyan ethnic groups on the island of Mindoro. He mainly uses Filipino instruments such as bean pod rattles, bamboo flutes or chimes made of iron nails. Baes is particularly interested in the noisy levels of Filipino music, its linguistic components and its poetic forms. In connection with New Music, his compositions sound quite unique.

Jonas Baes, born in Los Baños/Laguna in 1961, received his compositional training with José Maceda and Ramos P. Santos at the University of the Philippines. With the street action *Pantawag - Music for Calling People*, in which he equipped the performers with simple things like palm leaves and bamboo rattles, he provoked a police operation in 1981. The dictatorial system of Ferdinand Marcos (1917–89) had little artistic sense. Since the son of the former dictator has recently been aiming for power in the Philippines, the political aspect of the work of Baes and other Filipino artists is again as relevant as it was then.

After working for many years as a composer, musicologist and political activist, Baes went to Mathias Spahlinger at the Hochschule für Musik Freiburg in 1992 for further studies. It is only since this time that he has also used traditional European instruments. Baes uses the contradictions between Filipino musical tradition and European modernity, between timbres, textures and tuning systems, as a motor for his compositional creativity. Baes sees combining the tradition and modernity of East Asian metropolises with his European influences as a special challenge:

"I want them [Spahlinger and Lachenmann] to have an impact on how we here in Southeast Asia are constantly searching and defining and redefining a contemporary music in a sound that reflects our daily life here. The sound of the big city in Asia. The big city in Asia is full of contradictions: there are modern highways, but in between there are these, I call it, disjunctions of a small marketplace. It's like a discontinuity between modernity and tradition. And in every Southeast Asian city – Bangkok, Singapore, Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Ho Chi Minh – you see this idea of discontinuity between modernity and tradition. That actually gives me so much information about composing music, about the idea of continuity in music. So when I composed this piece and sent it to you, I was very reluctant because I didn't think it was coherent. In a way, I think that can be a dilemma for

many Southeast Asian composers. "1

"This piece", by which he means *Epos* (2021) for solo alto clarinet. In search of repertoire for this hitherto unusual instrument (in contemporary music), I contacted Jonas Baes to ask him for a composition. I had met him in 2012 during his time as Visiting Professor at the Musikhochschule Lübeck. At the time, I participated in his seminar on the music of the Philippines as a guest student. Since the 1980s, he had been intensively involved with the traditional music of Southeast Asia and documented it in sound recordings. From 1982–87, Baes visited the Philippine island of Mindoro every year to get in touch with the local ethnic groups, the Mangyan, and to study their music. Two of the seven ethnic groups living on Mindoro are the Iraya and the Hanunó'o Mangyan. *Epos* is inspired by his experiences with these two groups.

"Epos" as a dialogue with realities

Formally, *Epos* can be divided into three sections. The first section (m. 1 - 126 or sections A to F) describes a mystical ritual in the rainforest.

Dynamically located in the lowest range, tongue slaps, pitches on the threshold of their emergence, the admixture of air and breath noises characterise this section of the form. Specifically, Baes refers here to earlier research when he visited Mindoro: "The idea for this came maybe around 1985 or 83. There was a ritual in the village where I was staying on Mindoro with the Iraya Mangyan, and as I told you, the ritual has to do with calling spirits, and you hear a lot of sssss. And the village shaman told me, 'You can't be there, you can't record it, but I will tell you all about it.' I had to respect that. And the first thing he told me was that there are a lot of sounds, like breaking glass or like metal. I started thinking about the aesthetics of these multiphonic sounds. "1 Baes depicts the passing of the spirits in the Philippine rainforest through a kind of single-composition Doppler effect: a slight rise or fall in pitch symbolises a spirit approaching or moving away. According to Baes, the connection of the Mangyan people with the forest is fascinating in the sense that forest and spirits are one for them. He understands his composition as a statement to raise awareness for the destruction of the rainforest by "civilised" people and the resulting displacement of the Mangyan, which will ultimately lead to the extinction of their rich culture.

In the second part of the piece (m. 127 - 198 or sections G to I), Baes uses the performer's voice to produce pressed sounds and consonant sounds, as if to represent the spoken language of the Mangyan. The lutes arouse curiosity for this sound world, which comes from a distant cultural sphere. Baes offers the European listener a bridge here by drawing a connection between traditional sounds of his country of origin and those of Europe on this abstracted level of contemporary music:

"When we come to Europe, we find all these things that we have obviously already seen in tradition. Composing is a statement for me. It may not be as technical or virtuosic as the works of Spahlinger or Lachenmann. But at least I try to deal with my own reality. Obviously a dialogue between two realities I have experienced: my reality here and my small experience in Europe, or my ongoing experience in Europe." Baes expresses this perceived dialectic - and even more the divisions in everyday life in Southeast Asia described above - in Epos by inserting a striking run in the transition from the first to the second part, using wide leaps as well as the deepest sounds of the alto clarinet. After the filigree sounds that the composition has offered up to this point, this interjection seems disturbing. In the context of the Mangyan ritual depicted, the interjection can also be understood as the near threat to the rainforest and indigenous culture through aggressive destruction due to industrial interests.

The heart of the composition is the third part (m. 199 - 288 or sections J to K), entitled *ambahan*: "magkunkuno ti altang", roughly: "The past speaks". The *ambahan* is a sung poetic form of the Hanunó'o-Mangyan. Messages that have great meaning are communicated in *ambahan*, often love poems. *Amabahan* are written by carving them into bamboo sticks. On social occasions such as celebrations, the *ambahan* can also be performed as a "battle" in which several competitors answer each other in turn or alternately in the *ambahan*.¹ The realisation on the alto clarinet is abstract: the speech song of the *ambahan* is symbolised by a lying fifth sound, interspersed spoken syllables recall the spirit ritual of the first part. Inspired by the historical recording of an *ambahan* from 1953, a motif played by the traditional string instrument *gitgit* is adopted. In the original recording, it accompanies or overlays the woman's response to the man's *ambahan*. Here, too, the clarinet part disrupts the chant with a virtuosic, choppy sequence of notes descending into the low register (m. 241). The *amabahan* is interrupted by an improvisational interlude with found objects (m. 248), which symbolises the pollution and destruction of the rainforest through overexploitation and tourism and the resulting threat to the culture of the Hanunó'o-Mangyan.

Concern for tradition and nature

In many of his compositions, Jonas Baes expresses concern for the indigenous cultures of the Philippines and for the rainforest. His music is based on the dialectic of Asian tradition and European modernity and springs from a very concrete idea, namely the endeavour to preserve and perpetuate the traditional culture and nature of the Philippines. Baes' most frequently performed work, *Patangis-Buwaya* (2003)¹, conceived for four wind instruments of any culture, also fits into this series. The audience is included in the performance as fellow musicians and contributors to the

sound, and ultimately also as bearers of the message: the chirping of small wooden flutes played by the audience represents the living rainforest.

Patangis-Buwaya was completed in a refugee camp where Baes met with a community of indigenous Iraya-Mangyan people whom he had visited regularly on Mindoro years before. They had been forced to leave their ancestral territory and traditional livelihoods, fleeing armed conflict and deforestation of their rainforests. In the Iraya Mangyan language, 'Patangis-Buwaya' means "sound that could make even crocodiles cry", an expression that refers to the affective quality of the music, whose aesthetics are rooted in a traditional narrative: the hunter Alitawu had devised a plan to avenge the death of his wife. To do this, he summoned his dog by means of flute signals that are said to have been so expressive that even the crocodiles cried².

The music of Jonas Baes may also serve as a starting point for discovering other Southeast Asian composers. The works of the already mentioned José Maceda, whose scores are already visually impressive, are definitely to be recommended. The Indonesian Otto Sidharta published electronic music worth listening to in the 1970s-90s. The Thai Anothai Nitibhon realises multimedia projects and sound installations in addition to conventional chamber music. Chong Kee Yong (Malaysia, born 1971) and Feliz Ann Macahis (Philippines, born 1987) integrate timbres from their home countries into ensemble music for European instruments.

The collaboration with Jonas Baes and the composition Epos came about in 2021 with the call for Virtual Partner Residencies by the Goethe-Institut. We sincerely thank them for this extraordinary opportunity.

Audio to Epos in easy recording quality and sheet music to download:

<http://noralouisemuller.de/projects.html>

Two short films about the Mangyan:

YouTube video Ako, Hanunuo: www.tinyurl.com/ako-hanunoo

YouTube video With the Mangyan on Mindoro: www.tinyurl.com/mindoro-dinter

Gespräch mit der Autorin am 7. April 2021

Gespräch mit der Autorin am 29. März 2021

Gespräch mit der Autorin am 7. April 2021

vgl. Postma, Antonio, *The Ambahan: A Mangyan-Hanunoo Poetic Form*, in: *Journal of Critical Perspectives on Asia*, Bd. 3 Nr. 1 (1965), S. 71-85

Youtube-Video *Panlayisan: 'Ambáhan, Gitgit, Pahugut*, www.tinyurl.com/ambahan-gitgit, aufgerufen am 15. Mai 2022
Zahlreiche Aufnahmen dieses Stückes sind auf Youtube verfügbar, z.B. <https://tinyurl.com/patangis-buwaya>, aufgerufen am 15. Mai 2022

Baes, Jonas, *Patangis-Buwaya*, in: *Shima*, Bd. 7 Nr. 1 (2013), S. 121-126; sowie *Jonas Baes on Patangis Buwaya (2003)*, <http://www.smccomposers.com/jonas-baes-on-patangis-buwaya-2003.html>, aufgerufen am 15. Mai 2022