

Georges Aperghis' *Sextuor*
L'origine des espèces

libretto by François Régnaud

* *The texts printed in italics were written by Georges Aperghis*

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Sextuor: L'origine des espèces (1992)
Texts by François Régnaud and Georges Aperghis*
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SEXTUOR: The origin of species

(Introduction - Quintet)

CELLIST: In the beginning, in the beginning, there was not a beginning. The common ancestor is unknown. Between each species and the common ancestor, who is unknown, one must seek, forever seek the intermediate forms.

(Nonsensical Interlude)

SOPRANO 1:
(Aria) One must wander along the cliffs, shaped out of relatively hard rock, the waves reach the rocks but twice a day and for a short time. The waves eat at them, laden with sand and gravel, but the pure water does not wear down the rock. The undermined cliff crumbles in great masses, tumbling onto the beach, eaten away and worn down, atom by atom, to be rolled along by the waves that promptly grind them. Everywhere else, so many years, so many years have gone by since the water came to bathe them. Slow, oh slow action of the waves.

(Nonsensical Interlude)

SOPRANO 3:
(Aria) New species appeared very slowly, one after the other, both on land and in the sea. Species of different sorts, of different classes, did not change to the same extent not at the same speed. The Silurian lingulids differ little from the living species of the family, but the other Silurian mollusks, and all the crustaceans, have changed radically. When a species disappears from the surface of the Earth, no form identical to it ever reappears.

(Short Nonsensical Interlude)

CELLIST: All these facts, all these diverse facts, agree with my theory. According to my theory, the march of evolution must be slow, and affect only a few species at one time. Life appeared three and a half billion years ago, as soon as the Earth had cooled enough. The Earth appeared four and a half billion years ago, but life appeared three and a half billion years ago, in Africa and Australia, in layers of sediments amalgamated by Bacteria and blue Algae, the Stromatolites, agglomerations of prokaryotic Cells. Stromatolites, and Prokaryotics then vegetated for two billion years. And then nothing more. After that came eukaryotic Cells that are only one billion four hundred million years old.

CONTRALTO: A long silence, and then nothing, a long silence, a long absence, and then nothing more, and then suddenly, multi-celled animals, multi-cellular Animals, five hundred seventy million years ago. Throughout the history of the Earth was the reign of silence and a long sleepfulness.

CELLIST:
(Sprechstimme)
(With Nonsense) And then the Cambrian explosion, multi-celled animals, in the Ediacara fauna, all those soft bodies like great flat pancakes that only lasted one hundred million years. And the Tommotian fauna, more multi-celled life, without solid skeletons little blades, tiny caps failed experiment. And the great fauna of soft-bodied animals in the Burgess Shale, the great modern fauna five hundred thirty million years old the fauna of the Trilobites.

(Nonsensical Interlude)

SOPRANO 2:
(Sprechstimme) And since then, for five hundred million years, no new branches! So five hundred million years ago all the branches were already there, and many more than today! For the common ancestor is many, or rather, there are more ancestors than descendants, we the descendants we are not the outcome, convergence and crown, but we are dispersed, pure multiples, absolute contingency!

(Nonsensical Interlude – Trio - questions)

Each formation is not a new act of creation, but a scene taken at random in a drama that changed slowly and surely.

(Nonsensical Interlude – Trio B - Duet)

CONTRALTO: *I take death for better or worse*
DEATH *Willingly and patiently...*
(Aria)

I am Death by nature an enemy, that finally consumes everything. Annihilating life in all human beings, reducing each man to dust and ashes. On this ox moving away step by step I am seated and drive him without haste. But without running I bring somber death to the loudest when my hard dart pierces them.

*I have beaten eyes, a pale face,
A hoary head and bald, and I am only thirty.*

*Sixteen hours at least, I die, eyes open,
Turning, churning to right and back again on one then the other side, I storm, I shout...*

I am a young woman twenty-two years old, kept alive for more than thirteen months by a respirator, fed and protected from infection by intravenous injection. I am certain I shall never regain consciousness. The hospital persists, in spite of pressure from my family, in maintaining me. The reason is that I am not yet brain-dead, that is, my electro-encephalogram is not flat.

*Quid omnia
Quid omnia nihil
Si nihil cur omnia
Nihil ut omnia*

*And after three days the beauty comes to life.
Open up, open up, Father, Open up now.
I feigned death for three days to save my honor.*

(Nonsensical Interlude - Quintet)

SOPRANO 1:
(Sprechstimme) We are in the Age of Arthropods, in the fossiliferous rocks the oldest have suddenly appeared the species belonging to the great divisions of animals. But we are in the Age of Arthropods, far more numerous than Mammals.

CELLIST: Neighbours of birds, but closer neighbours of the Arthropods, who are around us, who are everywhere, we, the Vertebrates, are but five percent of the animal species.

SOPRANO 3:
(Spoken) The others are Invertebrates, Protozoans, Mesozoans, and the flat worms, Plathelminthes, Annelids and Mollusks: The Lumbricids who go into the Earth and digest mould,

(Nonsensical Interlude – Trio II)

SOPRANO 1:
(Sprechstimme) And among the soft Mollusks, Gastropods, Cephalopods, and lamelibranch bivalves: the lung Snail that no longer has gills,

CELLIST:
(Sprechstimme) The Scallop that moves by opening its valves, and the world of innumerable Mussels and Oysters.

SOPRANO 3:
(Spoken) The Nautilus and its spiral, the delicious Decapod, the Sleeve-fish, Calamary, the Cuttlefish and the Sepiola,

SOPRANO 1:
(Sprechstimme) And the heavy Octopods with eight suckered arms, and then the Arthropods, who conquered the uncovered lands.

(Nonsensical Interlude)

CELLIST: Where do you come from, who are you, you eighty percent of the species of Earth? Uniramians who are known Insects, Centipedes, Scolopendra, perhaps also Onychophora who go from sea to earth, lovers of most places. You horny Chelicerates who are the Spider, the Scorpion, the Acarian, the Limulid the settled or wandering Spider, that is never stuck in its own web, the Scorpion with its back shield, the telson of which makes up its sting, the Acarian, larva with three pairs of legs, but nymph with four pairs, and the American Limulid that uses its tail as a lever to stand up when it is at the bottom of the sea.

(Nonsensical Interlude - Quartet)

SOPRANO 1:
(Sprechstimme) Finally the Trilobites, vanished today popular fossil invertebrates, extinct for two hundred twenty five million years, how beautiful was your life in the Paleozoic!

MEZZO-SOPRANO:
(Duet) For at Burgess, in British Columbia, besides the four groups of Arthropods: Uniramians, Chelicerates, Crustaceans and Trilobites, were found more than twenty sorts of Arthropod that have all disappeared, Marrella, Yohoia, Opabinia, Burgessia, Waptia, Naraoia, Aisheaia, Amiskwia and Hallucigenia, Odaraia and Sidneyia, Molaria, Habelia, Emeraldella and Leanchoilia, and Wiwaxia, polychaete worm, Nectocaris, Persicaris, Canadaspis and Sanctacaris, Protocaris or Branchiocaris, and the odd Anomalocaris Dinomischus and the Odontogriphus, Alalacomeneus Wiwaxia, polychaete worm, Anomalocaris, this strange shrimp quite abnormal that perhaps used its lateral lobes to swim by waving as do Fish with their fins, but Anomalocaris, the largest animal in all the Cambrian is no way a Fish and remains an Arthropod, as his neighbours in the Burgess Shale. Yohoia, Wiwaxia, and Hallucigenia, with its seven pairs of pointed spikes and its seven tentacles, and no one knows which is its top or bottom, nor its front or back!

- SOPRANO 3:
(Aria) We do not come from them, Arthropods or Trilobites, Since we are Vertebrates and they are invertebrates! Trilobites disappeared, but some Crustaceans, Uniramians and Chelicerates stayed on after the decimation of most of the various species in the Burgess Shale!
- SOPRANO 1:
(Spoken) Who were you, where were you going when life was beautiful in the Paleozoic?
- SOPRANO 2:
(Sprechstimme) (Nonsensical Aria)
I was just saying: Species disappear much more slowly than they appear. Some appear, others disappear in a related way, for it is those who appear that destroy those who disappear.
- MEZZO-SOPRANO:
(Sprechstimme) The production of new forms entails the extinction of old forms in approximately equal numbers. Each species tends to multiply infinitely, but the number of species does not increase indefinitely. Ah, no! There is no common tree, no common trunk, but an immense espalier of which only rare products have survived!
- CELLIST:
I was saying: It seems to me that the way species become extinct agrees perfectly with my theory, the theory of natural selection. But in Burgess Shale, there was an even greater upheaval, maximal and contingent, followed by decimation, with a vast disappearance that I have had to see life in an entirely different light. Life is beautiful.
- SOPRANO 1:
BIRTH
(Aria) *I felt frozen and I curled up to keep warm. I fell through space, I was floating, I was terrified, afraid of falling of hitting something, of hurting myself.*
- Still rolled up in a ball. By turns, contracted or relaxed I felt I was slipping through a narrow passage. There were walls around me. Afraid of being hurt by forcing my way through, but when I came out, I understood that I had just been born and that I had not been hurt. I was out and I felt the cold air around me. My body stretched out a bit, I felt exhausted and happy I was born!*
- One would have said an angel, I was so beautiful; for my fainting had not taken away the bright colors of my complexion: my cheeks were rosy, and my lips like coral; only I had my eyes closed but I could be heard to breathe softly, which proved that I was not dead.*
- When I sat up, I touched my face, and the sensation was different, as if I had never yet felt something under my skin – my child's mask, frozen in terror, was torn.*
- (Nonsensical Interlude - Trio)
- SOPRANO 3:
(Spoken) What a sad sight are our geological museums! How incomplete are our collections! Isolated samples, often broken, rare specimens, many missing! But where are the fossil remains of these intermediate links? Ah! We have but a vague idea of the immense span of all those ages past!
- SOPRANO 1:
(Duet) Farewell, farewell, Invertebrates. Farewell to the Amoeba and the Paramecium. Farewell to the Worms and the Mollusks. Farewell to the Arthropods and the Echinoderms. O, Starfish, and you Sea Cucumbers and Sea Urchins, and you great Holothurian stretched out your full length on the sea floor, reaching out with your sticky arms, Deer of the sea farewell!
- SOPRANO 3:
(Spoken) We are all Vertebrates we have a backbone, pluricellular animals, around this Cord, our developed skeleton, cartilaginous or bony, articulated by the vertebrae, with an encephalus in front sheathing in its envelope of cartilage or bone: this hard skull, this sure skull that makes us call ourselves Cranians!

(Nonsensical Interlude - Quartet)

How all that sped up measured in years, in five hundred million years, and hour in Earth time an instant in solar system time a nothing in universe time, how all that appeared neither seen nor known as fast as the male with female copulates and reproduces!

(Nonsensical Interlude)

CONTRALTO:
(Sprechstimme) For here well before the emergence from the sea the two sexes appeared the cycle of love, the cycle of hate! The male hymenopterous insects fight, male Alligators fight, Stags fight for the possession of females, and still more horrible is the war between polygamous males, while the beautiful Birds have more peaceful moves and to conquer the female have but feathers and music!

MEZZO-SOPRANO: *I must do the lowest chores of the household:*
CINDERELLA *I am the one who cleans the dishes and scrubs the room. I sleep in the very back of the house, on a nasty straw mattress. I am patient and dare not complain. I pick the most beautiful pumpkin I could find in the garden. My clothes change into gold and silver cloth. I also have a pair of vair slippers, the prettiest in the world. I climb into a carriage. I leave without joy. He greets me, gives me his hand to climb down and takes me into the hall with all the company.*

Then there is a deep silence. All the ladies inspect my hair and my clothes. Then he takes me to dance. I dance with such grace that I am admired even more. When I hear the clock strike a quarter to midnight, I make a deep bow, and leave as quickly as can be. He follows me, but cannot catch me.

*I drop one of my vair slippers. He picks it up carefully, I arrive home breathless, without the carriage and in my nasty old clothes. He has me sit down, and brings the slipper to my small foot, he sees that it fits easily. Then I pull the other slipper from my pocket and put it on. Now my clothes become more magnificent than ever. I am taken to his home. He thinks I am still more beautiful than ever.
He marries me.*

(Short Nonsensical Interlude)

CELLIST:
(With Nonsense) What is a Fish?
It is a cold-blooded aquatic Vertebrate with jaws, while the Agnatha have none. And the Agnatha have but one nostril whence their gentle name Monorrhina, and they are the first known Vertebrates! As for the Fish that have jaws and two nostrils, how I admire their varied forms!

CONTRALTO:
(Sprechstimme) Serpentine as the Eels either eel-like, ribbon-like or globulous, disc-like as the Lampridae, box-like as the Ostraciontidae or even quite, quite flat like the Stingray or the Electric Ray.

SOPRANO I:
(Sprechstimme) Amphibians, how free you were when you emerged from the water, to the new shores of the Paleozoic, before the appearance of Reptiles, Birds and Mammals, those too ardent competitors! What is left of you but Toads, Newts and Salamanders! Animals with four legs, tetrapod animals, your head becomes mobile, you hear sounds, you hear music, through your ear, the middle ear, the seat of equilibrium, the echo chamber of sounds! For the Fish hears only through its skin, through animal tissue, while you, you hear the world! To the vertebrate's ear you add the middle ear, with its hammer and anvil, and the chain of ossicles, you hear life!

CELLIST: The Amphibian continues to lay eggs underwater, from which emerge a Larva, then a Tadpole that lives in the water and metamorphoses to come out in the open air. But with the Reptiles, that useful discovery, the amniotic egg, the egg laid on solid ground, but with its own waters inside, its amniotic liquid, so that the embryo has its aquatic life inside its egg. From now on, O, Vertebrates, freed from the sea and the rivers the dry land will be yours! The Freedom of the Carboniferous!

CONTRALTO: (Sprechstimme) Crawl Reptiles on the face of the Earth, with or without your venomous hooks! The Rattlesnake snakes its rattle, as the Viper puffs itself up, as the Cobra swells its hood not to warn its prey, -that would be silly- but as the bird bristles its feathers. But can I leave you, undulating Reptiles, without speaking of the Dinosaurs?

(Nonsensical Interlude)

(Aria) O, Dinosaurs who lived one hundred fifty million years, Lepidosaurians and Archosaurians, Stagasaurus with its spine Brontosaurus with its long neck, Triceratops horned, ferocious Tyrannosaurus and Diplodocus, and Pterodactyl with its pointed crest who flew, you would still be among the living (but we would not!), but it is said that a rain of dust spread out over the Earth after the frightening fall of a meteorite finally put an end, in a horrid twilight, to your throes!

(Nonsensical Interlude - Duet)

(Spoken) But here are the Birds separated from the Reptiles, the space between them crossed by the oldest of Birds, Archeopteryx, in the Oolitic strata, as by the Ostrich.

(Nonsensical Interlude - Quintet)

CELLIST: (With Nonsense) Why do Birds sing? Why are Birds beautiful? It is because female Birds, over thousands of years, chose the handsomest males, and the most melodious! Hence their singing and their plumage are due to sexual Selection which is a natural Selection!

MEZZO-SOPRANO: (Spoken) So I willingly accept that many male animals, the most magnificent of Birds, some Reptiles and a myriad of Butterflies of varied colors, acquired their beauty for beauty's sake! Perhaps many in the animal realm have the same taste for beautiful colors and for music!

(Nonsensical Interlude)

ENSEMBLE: In the Eocene epoch was the giant Bird, carnivorous and ferocious *Diatyma gigantean* like the Crane rather than the Ostrich, it held its Prey with its back feet, then tore it up with claw and tooth. It lived in Europe and North America, but the Mammals got the best of it and no one knows why! When they appeared our dear Mammals, somewhat after the Dinosaurs, they spent some one hundred million years in the company of Dinosaurs! If we bearers of breasts have survived them but sixty million years, we who lived in their time, it is not because we are stronger, nor that we ate their eggs, but because they disappeared because of the Catastrophe, and we survived in little nooks, at first unnoticed!

SOPRANO 2:
DELIVERY (Aria) *The contractions came, intermittently, all day long. I grew impatient. Rhythmically, the pains started again with strong, regular contractions. I was but pure animal energy. Its head appeared, then, each time the lips parted and went back in. I roared with all my might, then there was the spurt of liquid and flesh. The rest of the little body slid out, ejected by an ultimate orgasm.*

Ladies often behave this way, they give up what they have for what they want and seek to satisfy their desire and their caprice.

I begin to turn, to roll in one direction until I arrive almost at the edge, where I stop, turn and come back again. I go to the opposite edge, stop again, and start in another direction. All the while following a completely unpredictable itinerary. You might say I obey my own will. I feel empty. I'm dying to feel togetherness, with just anyone. But all attachments keep me from existing separately. If I am attached to someone, I become a mollusk, a leech.

(Nonsensical Interlude)

SOPRANO 2:
(Spoken) Finally, finally be named, primates, less developed in their anatomy more developed in their nervous system, the Prosimians, and then the monkeys, to whom the animal called Man belongs.

(Nonsensical Interlude)

CONTRALTO: We are among the Primates and the Great Apes erect. But where are the varied species of Hominids with their forgotten names: the vanished Homo erectus, Peking Man, and Java Man too and Neanderthal Man, collateral cousin, what became of them when we appeared in Africa, we, you, thee, I, Homo sapiens, mortal animal, sacred animal, social animal, theoretical and practical animal, between the hammer and the anvil, between dream and language, with a subconscious less animal than a bit ill, and more talkative than mechanical, with names and relatives, with a mother, with a father, saying Mama to the mother, and marked by the name of this Father, trembling at the name of Mother, "Mothers! the Mothers! that sounds strange, strange mystery, unknown goddesses and reluctantly named by us!" (*Goethe, Second Faust, Act I*)

SOPRANO 3:
THE LOVE EXPERIENCE
(Aria) *Oh, do not worry I do not want to hurt anyone. But I, I was truly having fun. I whirl about as if drunk. I understood that I was carrying a great weight on my shoulders. I have an explanation for the beginnings of life on Earth. I understood that I was already lucky to be a living being. But the film is not over yet. My mind little inclined toward technicity refuses to adapt to statics, to electromagnetics or infinitesimal calculus.*

I am but one of so many, but still I had my first experience of sex. I try hard to fit into the common mold. Here I am, in the rain, and I am beginning to have silly ideas. I tell myself, my house is made of bricks, the masonry work was carefully done. It will fill up with water to the attic like a bottle.

I take back nothing of what I have said.

CELLIST: O, you who listen to me tell this story full of memories and holes, we are that improbable and fragile species heading toward extinction and the extinction of all species, internal causes, external causes, I do not know, we the original species that tells the story of its origins full of holes and gaps, because we have so few documents, an incomplete story of the Earth in an ever-changing dialect, of which we have but the last volume, some fragments of its chapters and some lines of its pages or some letters, and words of uncertain meaning! Immense Nature improbable and unpredictable, contingent nature, where are we going, we who say life was wonderful, we who say life is wonderful?

(Postlude – Quintet)

FIN

Georges Aperghis (the composer) was born in Athens in 1945. Since settling in Paris in 1963 he has led an original and independent career, dividing his time between contemporary classical composition and music theatre, of which he is the most active and faithful exponent. His exploration of the stage began in 1971, when he composed *La Tragique histoire du nécromancien Hieronimo et de son miroir* the Festival d'Avignon, which has since featured him regularly in its programming.

In 1976, he founded a music theatre workshop, the *Atelier Théâtre et Musique* (ATEM). It was based in Bagnolet until 1991 when it moved to *the Théâtre Nanterre- Amandiers*. This structure allowed for a complete renewal of his compositional activity. Making use of musicians as well as actors, his shows with ATEM are inspired by everyday life. Events in society are transformed into a world of poetry, one that is often absurd and satirical. These works often develop gradually during the course of the rehearsals. All the constituent elements (vocal & instrumental music, gestures, scenic elements, etc.) are treated with equal importance and contribute - over and above the pre-existent text - to the dramatic content of the performances. From 1976 to 1995, more than twenty shows were produced by Georges Aperghis with ATEM including *Récitations* (1978), *Jojo* (1990), *Sextuor* (1993) and *Commentaires* (1996).

Parallel to his work within the realm of Music Theater, he continues to compose chamber and orchestral music, writing works for a wide variety of instrumental and vocal combinations. He has also written a series of solo pieces, both vocal and instrumental, dedicated to performers with whom he feels an affinity. These works often introduce theatrical aspects, including body movements, that confirm his theatrical flair.

His seven operas compliment and convene these activities. They are, in fact, a synthesis of these musical approaches. The text is central to the musical and dramatic structure. Thus the voices themselves become the axis around which the works revolve.

A prolific composer, his repertoire contains more than 100 works. Georges Aperghis has built up, with inexhaustible ingenuity, an individual output that defies classification. His music is serious yet sparkles with humor; is traditional in an offbeat way.

Two of his latest works, composed in 2000, have achieved wide success throughout Europe: *Die Hamletmaschine-Oratorio*, based on a Heiner Müller text, and the show *Machinations*, a commission by Ircam, which was awarded a Grand Prix by the French Composers' Society.

His numerous awards include the *Prix SACEM* (1974), the *Prix Paul Gilson* (1978), the *Grand Prix de la Ville de Paris* (1988), and the *Prix SACD* (1994). He was named *Commandeur des Arts et Lettres* in 1985. He was awarded the *Grand Prix National de la Musique* in 1998.

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