

The Solitude of Last Words

Claudio Ambrosini

A linguistic approach integrated with a mathematical type of procedure has become increasingly important over the last decades, ultimately arriving at being projected onto other areas of thought, communication and creativity. In music, for example, there has been an appearance of studies based on the idea of “generative grammar”, derived from the theory by the same name developed by Noam Chomsky in the 1950s and applied in this case to the relationships between sounds. It is precisely around these two dimensions – language and science, or better, words and numbers – that revolve two lyric operas that I have worked on in recent years: *Big Bang Circus* (written in 2001 and performed in a world premiere at the *Biennale Musica* in Venice in 2002) and *Il killer di parole* (“The Word Killer”), which I began to compose in 2008 and was performed for the first time at Venice’s Teatro La Fenice in 2010. In both of these works what at one time was viewed as two opposite approaches – one scientific, the other humanistic – were instead set face-to-face in order to discover the affinities that would make them appear to be synergistic.

Big Bang Circus

To support this assumption I will briefly quote from *Big Bang Circus* (subtitled *Piccola Storia dell’Universo*, “A Short History of the Universe”), an opera “in the form of a circus”, which brings together the stories, legends and myths used by humans – whether the inhabitants of the Amazon forests, those of the frozen lands of the poles or those of the Pacific islands, or the Maya, Indians, Greeks, Romans or countless others – to describe the Origin, the apparently unexplainable moment in which the whole thing began. Difficult to explain but not unimaginable: in fact, the human imagination and the words of poetry have described this moment in innumerable ways, envisioning the most diverse scenarios: a dream attached to a thread, the energy of a scream, the breaking open of an egg, the fall of a drop of milk, the winding of the coils of a snake, a wave, a wind, a pearl, a sound that animates, and more.

What *Big Bang Circus* was intended to underline, in a musical tale where imaginary characters (who sing the mythical stories) alternate with historical figures like Aristarchus, Giordano Bruno, Galileo, Max Born and Einstein (who tell their own

Claudio Ambrosini
Composer, Venice (Italy).

stories) is that when later men “of numbers” retrace the same steps, ask themselves the same questions, they end up formulating answers that, surprisingly, come to use the same terms, the same images and metaphors used much earlier by the men “of words”.

One example might be seen in this passage of the libretto, which is based on the *Rig-Veda*:

Eterna, cosmica energia,
danza sopra l'ignoranza nel cerchio di fiamma,
aura di sapienza.
Suona il tamburo, ruotando
col fuoco nelle mani, Shiva!

Eternal, cosmic energy
dances atop ignorance in the circle of fire,
aura of wisdom.
Plays the drum, spinning
with fire in his hands, Shiva!

Indian depictions of this moment show the god Shiva performing a dance surrounded by a circle of small flames – we might say the irradiation of an explosive energy – trampling a monstrous being beneath his feet, which represents Ignorance. Shiva holds something in each hand: in his upper left hand a small flame – at once “the generating spark” and the symbol of death, a metaphor for the cycle of destruction and regeneration that characterises both this god and the life of the entire universe – and in his upper right an hourglass-shaped drum, which he uses to accompany his dance (Fig. 1).

In the reconstructions that today’s scientists formulate, as they attempt to describe the same events, the images and terms that they employ are surprisingly similar: they in fact explain that the original nucleus of matter was so dense and compact that it was *stretched like the skin of a drum*. At this point the tension between the

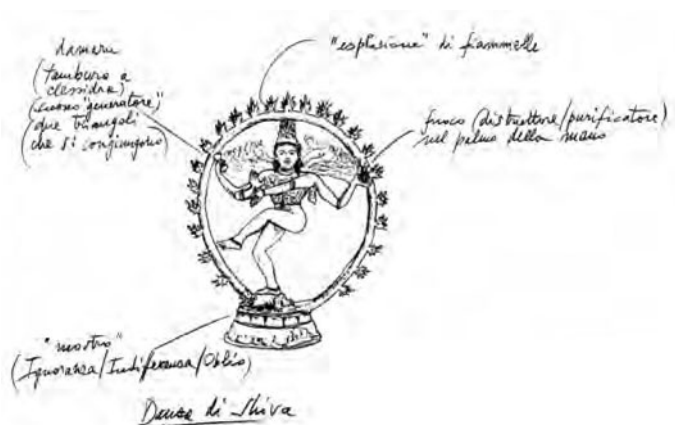


Fig. 1 Shiva dancing in the circle of fire. The small hourglass-shaped drum that he holds in his upper right hand is itself a symbol of the conjunction of two triangles which, in their turn, are abstract representations of the male and female reproductive organs. Their intersection thus represents the act of creation. This mimesis is depicted humanly each time there is contact between the upper and lower lips of the mouth (which are therefore also possible symbols of the sexual organs) in pronouncing the sacred syllable “Om”, recalled here by the circular frame that surrounds the dancing god. Author’s graphic representation and notes (© C. Ambrosini)

components of the nucleus was so great that they began to fibrillate, to *vibrate* like a sound wave,¹ with such *rhythm* and intensity that it produced a scission of the matter and gave rise to a flaming explosion that we call the *Big Bang*.

In other words, between humanistic culture and scientific culture, between thinking that tries to imagine and describe reality via symbols of intuition and one that faces the same reality by “re-reading” it in scientific terms, there are fewer difference and less distance than one would think.

“*Il killer di parole*”

Words and numbers are once again compared and contrasted, but to a greater extent, in the next opera of the cycle, *Il killer di parole* (The Word Killer),² which also aims to heighten the spectator’s awareness of the question of the death of languages. Formally speaking, this is a *ludodramma*³ in two acts, the first of which emphasises how (written) languages are continually subject to a process that is both evolutionary and degenerative, often caused by the borrowing of terms from other languages, in many cases absorbed indiscriminately.

In contrast to prime numbers, “prime” words – in the sense of new, recent – have the effect of conflicting with the language that receives them: while they are apparently an enrichment, in reality they often make it so that other words suddenly show their “age”, and are unwittingly considered *passé*, gradually becoming “last” words. More than the appearance of neologisms, a symptom of creativity, it is the passive importation of terms coming from other languages that, rather than enriching the lexicon of the host language, often results in its impoverishment, a reduced variety in the use of shades of meaning, an atrophy of the capacity to connote.⁴

¹ Many other myths also speak about creation having taken place by means of a screaming or shrieking sound: the Word of divinity that rends the silence (*En arkè en o logos ...*).

² Both of these works are part of a cycle of five whose first sketches date back to the 1980s and whose phases of composition and performance began in 1995 and concluded in 2012. The definitive order of the cycle comprises the following five works: *Big Bang Circus* (2001), *Il canto della pelle – Sex Unlimited* (2005); *Il killer di parole* (2008-2010); *Apocalypsis cum figuris* (2012) and *Il giudizio universale* (1996) (all concepts, music and librettos by Claudio Ambrosini, except for *Big Bang Circus*, on the libretto for which Sandro Cappelletto collaborated). The temporal arc spanned by this project therefore goes from the very first moment (*Big Bang Circus*) to the very last (*Il giudizio universale*). In the middle, an opera on Eros (*Il canto della pelle - Sex Unlimited* black), intended as attractive energy, present not only among living beings but also in magnetism, in the chemistry of the elements and so forth, the force capable of producing life, in “limitless ways and shapes”, in the universe. This is followed by an opera about the languages of the world, capable of recounting all these things (*Il killer di parole*) and thus, of saving these local languages from the growth of more national and international languages (such as English or Chinese). The penultimate of the cycle is a foreshadowing of final judgment, *Apocalypsis cum figuris*.

³ By *ludodramma* I mean a theatrical form that begins with the light tones of a playful opera and ends with a dark colours of a melodrama.

⁴ In Italy, for example, in addition to the continual absorption of English words, even when there is a perfectly corresponding Italian word, there is also a widespread Italianisation of terms that often come from the field of computer science, with results that are silly if not downright misleading, such as *scannare* for “to scan” or *brifare* for “to brief”. In some cases the adoption of one term has led to the production of others, as in the case of *editare* (from “to edit”), related words have been produced – particularly regarding its variants of “editor”, “edited by”, etc. – amusing ambiguities with the pre-existing *editore*, the Italian word that referred, not to the person who edited or revised a text, but to the publisher or publishing house. We now await other such adoptions with bated breath...

The second act of *Il Killer di parole* is instead devoted to the constant tragedy that takes place in our world without our ever being aware of it: the repeated disappearance of languages (in this case spoken) that appertain to small communities, so isolated and underdeveloped that they have never developed a writing or recorded their cultural legacy for posterity. When the last person able to speak such a language dies, in that instant humanity loses not only “that language” but its entire cultural patrimony of tales, myths, proverbs, beliefs, songs and whatever else that the community that produced it had developed over the course of centuries.

The Killer, the Wife

When it came time to transform this premise into a lyric opera, it was necessary to create characters who could give a face and voice to these intentions, so at the heart of the opera there are two principal characters, a couple (baritone and coloratura soprano) who represent the two fundamental approaches to the situation just described: on one hand the Killer, who is immersed in the “abstract” dimension of the words, and on the other his Wife, the expression of a thought that is more concrete, based on numbers. In order to describe them in a stroke we need only say that they work for the same company (a large publishing house) but at very different jobs: the Killer is employed in the updating of dictionaries, while instead his wife has an administrative job.

Being, however, a person who loves words, and a poet in his own right, the “killer” is loathe to carry out his role as “expunger of obsolete words”, that is, one assigned to remove from dictionaries the words that are seldom used to make way for terms recently introduced: he cannot accept “killing them”; indeed, he tries to defend them and to hinder the progress of reprinting. In the scene that opens the first act, we see him affectionately rocking his own son, just a few months old, as he tries to explain to him what words are:

IL KILLER DI PAROLE

(al bimbo, dondolando la culla):

Sono buone, le parole, sono belle,
sono loro la pelle delle idee, sono celle
per il miele dei pensieri, son giocattoli per la testa!
Sono tante le parole, sono tinte,
ben distinte, calibrate,
rare, nuove, sorpassate:
vecchie, ma buone! *(come per mangiarlo)* Am!⁵

THE WORD KILLER

(to the child, rocking him in his cradle):

They are good, words, they are fine,
they are the skin of ideas, they are a hive
for the honey of thoughts, they are toys for
the mind!
They are many the words, they are tinct,
quite distinct, calibrated,
rare, new, outdated
old, but good! *(pretending to bite)*
Chomp!

Good, functional, perhaps adopted by the great writers or used in sublime poetry, and yet still destined for the sad fate that awaits the “last” words: dictionaries can’t continue to grow infinitely, nor to weigh more and more beyond all reason, and so they must be eliminated to make room for the new. And this is precisely the job of the “Killer”, a task that drives him to despair (Fig. 2 and 3).



Fig. 4 - 3 C. Ambrosini, *Il killer di parole*, Act I, scenes 2 and 6. In the first act, the set design created by scenographer Nicholas Bovey situates the action in a cube suspended in the dark. As one scene follows another, the cube rotates, giving rise to a space that is both realistic and surreal (Reproduced with permission of Teatro La Fenice, Venice. Photo © Michele Crosera)

But the Wife too, talking to the child, is able in her turn to speak very affectionately of her “own” world, that of numbers:

LA MOGLIE

(Al bimbo, chinandosi sulla culla)

I numeri sono belli, sai?

Ce ne sono di lunghi e di corti e di primi e di infiniti...

Vedrai come ti piaceranno, perché sono divertenti! Molto!

(Lo prende in braccio e comincia ad allattarlo)

Bravo lui... Così.

(Il bimbo sugge il latte)

Dai, contiamo: un, due, tre:

m, m, m... Ancora. Un, due, tre:

m, m, m. Quattro, cinque, sei:

m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m...

e sono sedici!

(scherzosa, creando lì per lì un gioco di parole)

E se dici "sedici"... dici "se"! Capito? Se dici

"sedici", dici... "se"!⁶

THE WIFE

(to the baby, leaning over the crib)

Numbers are beautiful, you know?

There are long ones and short ones, and prime and infinite ones...

You'll see that you'll like them, because they are fun! Very!

(She picks him up and begins to nurse him)

Good boy... That's the way.

(The baby suckles)

Come on, let's count: one, two, three:

m, m, m... Again. One, two, three:

m, m, m... Four, five, six:

m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m, m...

m, m... and that makes sixteen!

(playfully, making up a word game)

And if you say "sixteen"... you say "if"

Get it? If you say "sixteen"... you say

"if"!⁷

Shortly after, to rock him to sleep with a lullaby (Fig. 4), she invents another word game, this time much more cryptic because it is based on the first syllable of the numbers, in succession from 1 to 10: *Uno, due, tre, quattro, cinque, sei, sette, otto, nove, dieci*.



Fig. 5 C. Ambrosini, *Il killer di parole*, Act I, scene 3. Roberto Abbondanza and Sonia Visentin as the Killer and the Wife, performing at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice (Reproduced with permission of Teatro La Fenice, Venice. Photo © Michele Crosera)

LA MOGLIE

(Cullando il bimbo)

Un due tre: qua-ci-sei!

Se- (h)o- no-di-... Un- do- tre-!

*(Il bimbo si addormenta.**Più riflessiva, tra sé)*Spero davvero che ami i numeri
se vuol esser felice nella vita.

THE WIFE

(Rocking the baby)

Un due tre: qua-ci-sei!

Se- (h)o- no-di-... Un- do- tre-!

*(The baby falls to sleep.**More thoughtfully, to herself)*I really do hope that he loves numbers
if he wants to be happy in life.

What she makes up is a surreal riddle which, rewritten in numbers, appears like this:

1, 2, 3: 4, 5, 6

7, 8, 9, 10... 1, 2, 3!

Later, the Wife addresses the Killer – who she had previously reproached, accusing him of losing himself in useless nitpicking – asking him to kiss her with the famous verses in Latin by Catullus:

LA MOGLIE

(per un attimo più dolce, con affetto e nostalgia)

Da mi basia mille, deinde centum,

dein mille altera, dein secunda centum,

deinde usque altera mille...

THE WIFE

(for a moment sweeter, with affection and nostalgia)

Da mi basia mille, deinde centum,

dein mille altera, dein secunda centum,

deinde usque altera mille...⁸

The rendering of this poem takes place in the form of a virtuoso aria distributed on different planes of sound, whose difficulty lies not so much in the traditional hail of notes as in the soprano's ability, as acrobatic as it is rare, to double or even triple her own voice, passing suddenly from very low notes to middle notes to acute and then down again and then up again and so on without any transitions, so that what is created is a kind of three-dimensional sound space (Fig. 5).



Fig. 6 C. Ambrosini, *Il killer di parole*, Act I, Scene 3, mss. 153-158. Three planes of sound that revolve around a B-flat that belongs to three different octaves (© Edizioni Ricordi 2010)

Saving the languages of the world

The second act takes to audience to another time (twenty-five years have passed since the first act) and poses new problems. Now the synergy of words and numbers is represented in another form, with numbers transformed directly into technology, into audio-visual recording instruments used in the attempt to save the languages of small communities in danger of extinction.

The characters are the same, except that in the meantime the Son (who in the first act was in his crib) has grown up and become a young attorney devoted, following

in the footsteps of his father, to noble causes.⁹ But many other things have also happened: the Wife has had an exceptional career, thanks to her administrative skills, and has been named general director of the entire company where both she and her husband work. The company itself has grown enormously and has gone from a simple publishing house to a huge multimedia production centre, with publications that go from books to disks, to videos and documentaries.

In contrast, the Killer's career has been unimpressive. Because of his hesitancy and excessive love for words, in the past twenty-five years he has only "killed" a few, and thus was not even able to complete the updating of the first dictionary he was assigned to. That had to be done, in his stead and in secret, by his wife. And it is precisely because she is now a powerful woman that the Killer has not been fired. In fact, a new job has been created just for him: recording the voices of the various "last speakers", the last people capable of speaking extremely rare languages, those belonging to communities that, upon the death of the last speakers, are destined to disappear without a trace.

In the course of the act, this time situated in an audio-visual studio, we thus see a parade of curious figures, coming from the most isolated places, who make the sounds of their languages, carefully recorded by Killer (Fig. 6).



Fig. 7 C. Ambrosini, *Il killer di parole*, Act II, scene 3. Recording of the "Last Speaker of the Windy Lands", an old man who recites an epic tale in a completely unknown language (Reproduced with permission of Teatro La Fenice, Venice. Photo © Michele Crosera)

⁹ In reality the opera involves six singers, three of whom have a constant role: in addition to the Killer and the Wife, there is the Son (a tenor). The others alternate among several roles: the second soprano plays The Dead Word, the Photograph and the Last Speaking Woman in the Couple; the bass plays The Colleague, The Last Speaking Old Man, and the Last Speaking Man in the Couple. To these are added the chorus, which plays Humanity, The Last Speakers of the Coastlands, The Last Speakers of the Rocky Lands, and the Host of Last Speakers.

But all of this occurs in a climate increasingly filled with apprehension and suspense because of the pressing scansion of the numbers, or rather, of the tempo: we come to learn that this is by now the last day on which it will be possible to carry out this documentation. In fact, starting on the very next day the entire world will use only one currency, the Single Currency, and more importantly, there will be only one language, the Single Language. The “Killer”, increasingly anguished over the impossibility of recording the hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of people who are still lined up outside his door, and feeling himself on the verge of failure once again, decides to allow all those waiting to come in at once (Fig. 8) and has them sing all together:

IL KILLER DI PAROLE

(*con energia contagiosa, alla folla che si accalca*)
Forza: raccontate, dite quello che volete, per sal-
varvi.

Mandate il vostro saluto al mondo che verrà:
univoco, vuoto e felice!

Parlate, sorridete, salutate ...

E gridate: io sono! (Fig. 7)

THE WORD KILLER

(*with contagious energy, to the host that
crowds in*)

Come on: tell your stories, tell what you
want, to save yourselves.

Send your greetings to the world to come:
univocal, empty and happy!

Speak, smile, say hello ...

And shout: I exist! (Fig. 7)



Fig. 8 C. Ambrosini, *Il killer di parole*, Act II, scene 9, mss. 29-34. The Killer encourages the host of Last Speakers with an ascending vocal line, almost like a sequence of pressing waves (© Edizioni Ricordi 2010)

But by now midnight is drawing inexorably closer, and the *ludodramma* takes on its darkest overtones. The enormous effort of the Killer will in fact turn out to be completely in vain. In the final moments, while outside the window are seen the luminous explosions of the fireworks celebrating the arrival of the new year, the Wife counts down the remaining seconds. The sequence of numbers that in the first act provided the material for a word game transformed into a lullaby, now reappear, reversed into a much more bitter game:

LA MOGLIE (*felice*) Dieci, nove, otto,
sette, sei, cinque, quattro, tre, due, uno!

IL KILLER DI PAROLE

(*disperato, con rabbia*) Zero!
(*Tutti si interrompono di colpo e
rimangono immobili, a bocca aperta,
come in un fermo-immagine*)

LA MOGLIE (*al pubblico,
sollevando il calice, con un sorriso ipocrita*)
Cin-cin e ... auguri!

THE WIFE (*happy*) Ten, nine, eight,
seven, six, five, four, three, two, one!

THE WORD KILLER

(*desperate, with anger*) Zero!
(*Everything is suddenly interrupted and
all remain immobile, open-mouthed, as in
a still image*)

THE WIFE (*to the audience, raising a
glass, with a hypocritical smile*)
Cheers and ... best wishes!

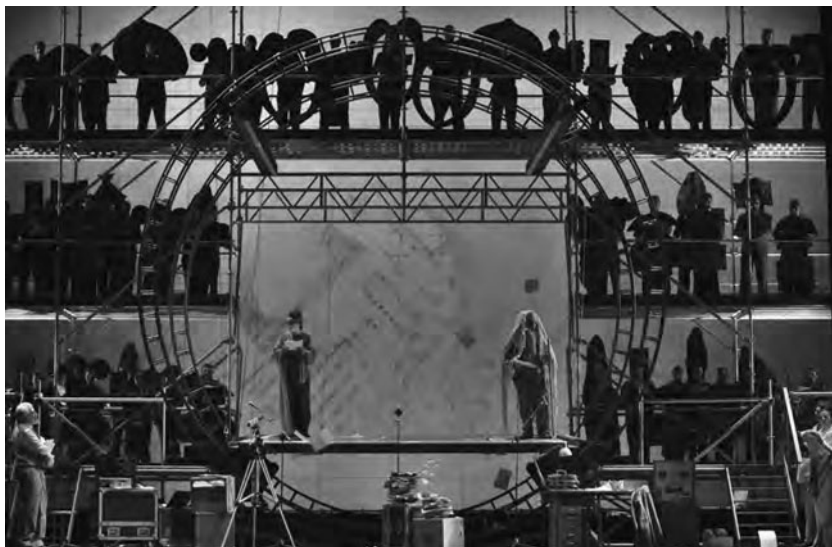


Fig. 9 C. Ambrosini, *Il killer di parole*, Act II, final scene. By now crowding into the recording studio there are dozens of “Last Speakers” coming from the most remote corners of the globe, and collectively engaged in a desperate farewell song, each in his or her own language, in the attempt to make themselves understood and communicate (Reproduced with permission of Teatro La Fenice, Venice. Photo © Michele Crosera)

These bitter good wishes must instead be taken up again with a certain amount of hope: the idea, apparently utopian, of recording all the endangered languages of the world, has instead been given very serious consideration: the National Geographic Society in the United States and the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom have recently begun a program named “Enduring Voices” to record “talking dictionaries” of vanishing languages. The project will begin with 6,500 such languages.

The Word Killer would be happy to hear it.

Translated from the Italian by Kim Williams