

# OPERATION : ORFEO

Libretto by Ib Michael

*This libretto comprises two texts by Ib Michael:  
The indented passages are taken from his collection of poems,  
"Himmelbegravelse" (Sky Burial). The remainder of the text was commissioned  
for this production.*

*Translated by Barbara Haveland*

I

Through marrow and bone  
through space and solar wind  
flying souls  
keys of life and death

Frosted white whales  
with glacial brows  
vaulting time

The monks blaring out their songs  
pillars of horns  
calling up the ocean deeps  
rending the plain a-wailing  
over the roof of the world

The heavens drowned you in rain  
Whilst echo

- echo of that name  
you bound in music  
ever she fell  
from your face

splits its wing in two  
and plunges your body in shadow

They love the red coral of the ocean  
the ocean is farther off  
than heaven

The first of the waves has caught at your foot  
pebbles nuzzle, silica on skin,  
swirling in the pull of the surf  
you're pulled under  
the last breath, nipped off,  
rises upwards  
to a reflection of the heaven  
you left in hopes of finding

For reasons unknown  
they carry within them  
this longing  
for the things of the sea  
and among the mountains  
they blow their conch horns

Eelgrass caresses your cheeks  
grey-green shadows  
pat you with chilly restraint  
eternal this die is  
heavy with eyes and dumbness  
your body a stone  
thrown after her image  
as the circles reach the outermost ring

green stones in the ears  
blue stones and green  
chains of amber and coral

The first silhouettes loom into view  
your soar through the tower of the skull  
with a ringing in your ears  
out into the siren light  
where to your wonder  
they are changing places  
as dancers, ah yes, as dancers  
floating in space  
circumscribed by light and shadow

From the Book of the Dead  
a mass for bodies now flown  
this is where pillars of notes stretch their lengths  
gold runs  
soft as butter in basins of stone  
in the dimly lit halls  
where all rainbows do end

Outside  
lies the dismemberer's rock  
where sooner or later all are washed up  
as skeletons,  
rust-hued and hollow from hammering  
down on bonemeal and bones  
necks of thighbones and pelvic girdles  
livid still with freshly-skimmed life  
in the early morning light

Angels and unicorns of the sea  
rise and fall within the ring  
in the crystal orb of the stillness  
mobiles bob round your arm -

You reach out,  
the white flesh of your hand magnified  
and the shoal dispels

They blow a bubble  
that has stopped your breath  
and supplanted your blood with thunder

With your vast mouth you colour  
you colour the water red  
as you mime her name  
and feel the salt in your eye.  
You snatch at silhouetted forms  
only to be brushed by riven silk  
brushed by a shiver from the soul  
as the shoal turns away -

You are alone, alone as before  
the sea bed is spread with launderers' blueing  
flurries of sand fly up in slow motion  
the wafting of the coral  
foetus-like brain curling round its finger  
the network of veins illuminated  
transparent and fine  
a breath goes out among  
starfish

You would plunder a grave of its contents  
comb through a wreck for the drowned  
win through to one face in a crowd  
dark with forgetting -

as the venom clove from heel to heart  
all the sounds in the world sank to the bottom of the sea

II

In the palace of blue vowels  
fishly mouths work amid sorrow  
and bubbles silently rising  
to build  
a cathedral of sound

Win through to one face in a crowd  
dark with forgetting -

From the sack they sprinkle more bonemeal  
onto the rock  
toning down the colours  
and lightly dusting the meat

Up in the tower they raise  
the white noise of the seashells, a whale calotte  
to plumb the yawning depths  
of the bell  
stalactites catch the light  
of the dim forest mosaic  
panes of glass high in the nave  
colouring the gloom

Only a grey tinge  
to those naked loins  
betrays the body's state

Then they are once more  
veil-tails  
dancing in a ring  
round your outstretched hand

But a second  
where the skin shrinks below freezing  
then the corpse lies crimson  
with the back flayed off

Were you to rip off the face  
It would stiffen on the instant to a mask  
and the mouth gape in  
a portal of emptiness

You finger a thousand sunken pianos  
you spy a ship with masts by the hundred  
fifty cathedrals go drifting by  
with glass mosaics split asunder

You fall back, feeling faint  
relieved by a scream  
the dead did not make  
at last persuaded  
of limbs no longer in spasm  
their lithe repose

She is yours now, but spare us the song  
her eyeholes are veiled by skin  
cartilage curbs both her hands  
should you look back one more time  
all blood will run from you both!

III

She took to the air  
every other moment  
he clutched  
only to embrace himself  
with tear-stifled sobbing  
at last it seemed  
the very heavens opened  
there she hovered  
with her feet upturned  
and her hair hanging down  
reaching out her arms  
to him  
as one who is drowning  
her face fluctuating  
between terror and smiles

Wind through to one face in a crowd,  
dark with forgetting -

An underwater current  
sets her hand to waving  
and she sways in silhouette

She is but one drowned dancer  
among many  
who have forsaken choreography  
and have entered into silence  
where the sunlight sails  
on a film of mineral salts

As yet still caught inside your lungs,  
a pocket of air confined by your ribs  
As yet the telegraph still crackles  
within its own closed circuit where

the gills of the heart palpate  
as yet her name is still dawning on your lips

- echo of that name  
you bound in music  
ever she fell  
from your face -

With your vast mouth you colour  
you colour the water red  
as you mime her name  
and feel the salt in your eye.  
You snatch at silhouetted forms  
Only to be brushed by riven silk  
brushed a shiver from the soul  
as the shoal turns away -

You raise her up from the ocean floor  
dancing

with face averted

she pitches, heavy as a sleeper  
in your arms

Strung out in the air  
between circling silhouettes  
with wind  
rushing through feathers

The two leading birds  
hold everything spellbound  
the sun refuses to rise  
the day hangs at rest in its heaven  
no shadows race across the mountain tops  
they too await  
the butcher's cry

As he cuts off the head  
the faintness again  
face to face with features  
with eyes and an open mouth  
so staggeringly weightless  
without its body

You waltz with her backwards  
over aquamarine meadows  
once more the shoal closes round you both

You lead your unicorn through a forest  
resounding with the fishes' song

As in halls of mirrors the image clings  
limply to your skin, you feel all your bones  
screeching of glass  
and oxygen forsakes your fingers

He sharpens the blades of the knives  
makes an incision behind one ear  
gives one tug  
then begins to rotate  
keeping the knife blade close in to the bone  
and off comes the scalp  
in one orange-peel spiral

When struck by tuning forks  
the cranium sings  
on its pillar of salt  
Silver seeps out of the mouth  
as the pressure builds  
you break into a breaststroke  
and scissor through space -

Weighed down by a host  
which will not let go  
and the surface now  
seems dancingly near

When she slips

You finger a thousand sunken pianos  
you spy a ship with masts by the hundred  
fifty cathedrals go drifting by  
with glass mosaics split asunder

You can see her face  
submerged in the mirror's silvering once more  
the drowned one turns away from you  
sinking  
to a point in darkness

Face to face features  
with eyes and an open mouth  
so staggeringly weightless  
without its body

Weightless as before  
you break through, head exploding  
The singing continues, following the stream

According to legend  
a myrtle wreath bobs off into the dusk  
the concert grands play, sable-sailed  
with masts by the hundred the ships go down

Buried on the wing  
at the ends of the earth  
the day has returned  
lightened by a wavering rock

On the shoreline a seagull's raucous cry  
sounds across white stones  
sleep and forgetting in symphony  
capsuled in amber caskets

Underneath I am blue  
and hard as a Rock