

## RETURNING HOME

Ludger Engels and Solistenensemble Kaleidoskop

“Torna, deh torna Ulisse” (“Return, oh return, Ulysses”) – with these urgent words, Penelope implores the return of her husband. She has been waiting half her life for him, and her yearning has become the very purpose of her life. Ulysses had gone off to the Trojan War twenty years before, but even though that war has long since been won by the Greeks, the King of Ithaca remains lost. And when Ulysses finally does find his way back to his homeland, Penelope seems not to recognise him anymore. What does it mean when two people meet again after such a long time? What marks have war and a ten-year odyssey left behind? After all that’s happened, is a homecoming even possible? And what does “home” mean anyway for each individual among us? These are the questions asked by the music theatre work *Returning Home*, based on Claudio Monteverdi’s *Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria* and songs from the Korean cycle *Gagok*.

Claudio Monteverdi was born in Cremona in Italy in 1567. He was one of the most influential composers of the West, and was active at the time when the Renaissance gave way to the Baroque. He revolutionised vocal music and was the true founder of the European genre of opera. Monteverdi dedicated himself to completely new forms of expression, placing the text in the foreground and making music serve the drama. And in so doing, he was the first composer to put the whole spectrum of human emotions onto the stage. Monteverdi wrote over a dozen operas, though only three have survived: his ground-breaking *Orfeo*, the late work *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, and his opera *Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria*, which was first performed in Venice in 1640 and was thought lost for many years thereafter. All three works have experienced a renaissance of their own in the past 50 years. *Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria* has come down to us only in the form of the melody and vocal lines, plus a figured bass. We do not know the orchestration, however – a fact that makes considerable demands on those wishing to perform it today, but at the same time gives them a lot of freedom.

The libretto has been written by Giacomo Badoaro (1602-1654), who based it on books 13-23 of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Homer’s two epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, created in the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C., were the first great works of literature of Ancient Greece, and together form the foundation stone of European cultural and intellectual history. The *Iliad* describes different episodes from the ten years of the Trojan War, while the *Odyssey* depicts the subsequent ten-year-long, gruelling wanderings of Ulysses, who has helped to win the war but cannot find his way home afterwards. His home island of Ithaca lies just 500 nautical miles from Troy, but it takes ten years for him to get back there. His journey is marked by battles with monsters and fierce tempests, but also by long sojourns on different islands of the Aegean. There are numerous reasons why Ulysses and his companions cannot reach home straight after the Trojan War. But was it perhaps simply impossible to find their way straight home after the traumatic experiences of such a wearying, brutal conflict? Did Ulysses need this circuitous route with its distractions, its drug experiences and its encounters with the underworld, before he could even become capable of setting foot in his homeland again? This ancient, mythical story is in many instances prescient of the experiences of war veterans in our own time, who are often only able to find their way back to their supposedly cosy home world with great difficulty. But it also echoes the fate of so many people who find themselves compelled to leave their homelands in order to seek another elsewhere, but without ever finding it. And it reminds us that the wounds left behind by war are often still unable to heal, even after several decades.

While Homer tells us at length of Ulysses’ experiences, he only mentions Penelope on the margins. She has become the embodiment of the faithful wife, and puts off her many suitors by means of ever new ruses. Even when everyone else has given up hope of the long-lost Ulysses ever returning, she remains unerringly convinced that he will. Waiting for Ulysses becomes her whole purpose in life; her yearning is her real *raison d’être*. Is it at all astonishing that she is unable to recognise Ulysses when he suddenly appears before her? For the man who has returned to Ithaca has hardly anything left in common with the man to whom she said farewell twenty years ago, let alone the man who has occupied her lonely yearnings over these many years, and who has come to inhabit her soul. In this

sense, the sudden fulfilment of her deepest wish – the return of her lost husband – also means she risks losing the meaning of her life.

At roughly the same time that Monteverdi was active in Italy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the *Gagok* was created – one of the most demanding vocal genres of classical Korean music. However fundamental the difference might be between these two forms of vocal art – opera and *Gagok* – they are nevertheless united in that both put human emotions on stage in a highly artificial manner. The *Gagok* cycle comprises 41 melodies, of which 15 pieces are for woman's voice. In *Returning home*, three of those 15 are juxtaposed with the music of Monteverdi: *Ujo Isudaeyeop*, *Gyemyeonjo Pyeongeo* and *Gyemyeonjo Dugeo*. In this version, these three melodies are assigned the following *Sijo* verses, which tell of love and yearning, lifelong lies and escapism in their own inimitable way:

These songs from the *Gagok* cycle become a mirror to the incessant, diametrical search for a state of “arrival” on the part of Penelope and Ulysses. By juxtaposing, overlapping and linking these two seemingly so different musical forms of expression – composed at the same time, but in regions of the world so very distant from each other – we allow space to emerge for new things, and for encounters with oneself, with the Other, and with what diverges from the familiar. Only when our gaze at what is ours is refracted through what is foreign can we perceive the “home” we yearn for: a place that is close, secure, and offers comfort.