

On Light and Darkness **The Composer Mela Meierhans**

Born in Zug, Switzerland, in 1961, she finds her very diverse sources of inspiration through collaboration with other artists who come from other cultures, or live ‘outside the box’. Meierhans particularly admires the formerly Basle-based Anne Blonstein (1958-2011), whose text forms the basis of *4S* for vocal quartet (2001/02, Ed. TME 0597). A liking for literature also underlies the setting of Max Frisch’s *Fragebogen I* (1966) in *twentyfive* for soprano, mezzo-soprano and speaker (2011, Ed. TME 3479), where the two singers sort of put the speaker on trial with the aid of Frisch’s catalogue of questions. *Tunnel II* for soprano, oboe, cello and playback (2002, Ed. TME 0605), is similarly based on the surrealistic text *Der Tunnel* by Friedrich Dürrenmatt. Dürrenmatt depicts a conversation between a young man and a train driver. As the train disappears ever further into the mountain, the traveller asks “What should we do?” “Nothing”, replies the guard, with, as Dürrenmatt puts it – “spooky hilarity”.

Words into Music

Mela Meierhans approaches the story as if she were on the Direttissima. Train noises in the form of an ostinato pedal point accompany the composition, which lasts over twenty minutes. The text, often declaimed by the soprano in recitative style, is always comprehensible. The breakneck journey into the unknown is anticipated by Meierhans through hard, forward-thrusting, repetitive patterns. There follows an oppressive silence, and finally a dramatic agglomeration: a baby cries. And the surreal-tragic end peaks in the vigorously insistent high notes of the soprano.

“I love layerings of the kind one experiences when looking at mountains: here is a first elevation, and behind it are many others. It is a multidimensional space, similar to the ones that arise in composing.” What Mela Meierhans describes is naturally more striking in works for larger ensembles. In 1996 she begins work on the major orchestral work *Nightselves oder Meine Nacht schläft nicht* (1996-2001, Ed. TME 0518), which the Basle Symphony Orchestra premiered in 2001. When the conductor Mario Venzago requested a work without violins, Meierhans’ choice of topic was clear: darkness. *Nightselves*, a sombre filigree picture by Sonja Sekula (1918-1963), serves as the source of inspiration; text fragments by the Swiss artist stimulate further imaginings.

One is struck by the frequently layered organisation of this roughly half-hour piece, which gets by almost completely without thematic material or meaningful intervallically constructed units. Instead – with the support of an excellently cultivated sense of sound – it’s a matter of exactly the “multidimensional spaces” mentioned above. Unusual kinds of instrumental pitch- and noise-production play just as great a role here as a large percussion section, which underpins an extremely interesting interplay between foreground and background.

Preferring Darkness

Despite the diversity of colours, it is gloom, the nocturnal side of life, that recurs most often in Meierhans’ oeuvre, whether it’s the tunnel journey in Dürrenmatt’s poem, or the picture *Nightselves*, or else the engagement with death rituals in the cycle *Jenseitsreigen*, in which Meierhans uses both vernacular worlds of sound (*Tante Hänsi*) and Arab modes and rhythms (*Rithaa – Ein Jenseitsreigen II*). In *malina fragmente* for string quartet and mezzo-soprano

(2011, Ed. TME 3480) Meierhans sets various quotations from Anna Maria Bürgi, Ingeborg Bachmann and Carolin Emcke. It is about violence and conflicts which remain unresolved for all three authors. The music reflects the questing character of the texts, which are partly whispered, partly spoken, and partly reduced just to their consonants. Drifting string textures underpin the fragile content of the texts; in spoken passages the strings sometimes come together on a unison, in accord with the voice's pitches. Over the course of the four-section piece Meierhans speeds up the changes between vocal characteristics. The coda comprises an extended ritardando – at the sentences “The silence hardens like a block of ice. Frozen inside, time passes without us”, motion comes to a total halt. All that is left is the voice humming and the pitchless bowing of the body of the viola. The temporal art of music comes to a standstill – and cools right down.

Torsten Möller [Translation by Richard Toop]