

Klaus Huber

Seeking oneself in the unfamiliar

For Klaus Huber on his 80th Birthday / by Max Nyffeler

Whenever people talk about politically engaged music these days, the name Klaus Huber crops up regularly. Ever since the Donaueschingen premiere of his major oratorio ...Erniedrigt – Geknechtet – Verlassen – Verachtet... in 1983, if not earlier, he has ranked as a composer who believes in the possibility of a better world, and gives expression to this belief in his work. Musically, his humanistic ideas are formulated with an elevated artistic ethos, in which respect he is similar to Luigi Nono (who was also born in 1924), and he has always insisted that music is a necessary form of communication between human beings. But his messages have never made things easy for the audience, and he has made no concessions to the mood of the times. Standing between the materialorientated attitude of the traditional avant-garde and the hedonism of a postmodernism oblivious to history, he has remained true to his path throughout the decades – a composer who, with his music and his literary utterances on the social role of art and artists, has constantly given food for thought, who can make things uncomfortable for himself and others, and doesn't shy away from showing his colours.

Expression and Construction

In any music, what is often broadly called engagement is initially conveyed by the text being used. But with Klaus Huber, the content of the text is transformed into musical structure, sublated in it, in the Hegelian sense. So engagement is not a matter of verbal declarations, but is communicated musically, through and through. The highly expressive sonic gestures that permeate his major orchestral works and oratorios arise entirely from the inner essence of the musical material. The general rule here is: the more differentiated the structure, the more complex the musical expression, and the more depth the latter possesses.

In Huber's compositions there is a taut balance between intensity of expression, and construction. Obviously, this necessitates a high level of consciousness of form and craftsmanship. In the course of almost 60 years of composing, he has developed both to the highest degree of mastery, while making them subservient to his need for expression. There are few composers today who can extract music from within and enable it to speak as eloquently as he can.

The Power of Softness

This also holds good where no text is actually present, or where, as in the string trio *Des Dichters Pflug* of 1989, it is added to the instrumental sound as an autonomous layer; here, single words and syllables from a poem by Ossip Mandelstam are whispered softly by the instrumentalists. This gives rise to a linguistic dimension which can be surmised rather than understood, forming a strange alien yet intimate commentary on the rapt sonic world of the strings tuned in third-tones.

The rhetorically sharpened gesture, the advocacy of the oppressed and disenfranchised, and the garishly painted apocalyptic visions are just one side of Klaus Huber's music. There is also this other side, at the opposite extreme, but just as precisely formed, and just as concerned to communicate with the listener. At such moments, the sound withdraws totally into itself. Here, in a stance of purest introversion, at the limits of audibility, new dimensions of expression and feeling open up, whose effect is just as suggestive as the gestures of outcry and protest.

This inclination to the intimacy of chamber music, to introversion and the refinement of musical means is a thread running throughout his work. It can already be noted in the chamber cantata *Des Engels Anredung an die Seele*, whose first performance in Rome in 1959 marked the start of Klaus Huber's international career. This line of development continues in the sixties with works like the string quartet *Moteti – Cantiones* and the enigmatic *James Joyce Chamber Music*. In the late eighties, this characteristically introverted tone again assumes a crucial place in the composition *La terre des hommes*, inspired by texts by the French philosopher Simone Weil. These passages seem like windows onto another reality. At the same time, they anticipate a new creative phase.

Schwarzerde: Annihilation of Art and a Shimmer of Hope

This phase commences in 1989, with the string trio *Des Dichters Pflug*. Now, for a whole decade, Huber's field of vision is dominated by the figure and work of the Russian poet Ossiip Mandelstam. Mandelstam's tragic history as an artist who falls victim to barbaric social reality inspired him to write his third opera *Schwarzerde*, premiered in Basle in 2001. In it, Huber's old topic, the conflict between individual and collective, between humane vision and anti-human power, is presented as the drama of a 20th century artist, and highlights the fragile position of art in a world of violence. In a crassly materialistic society – whether it's the Soviet Union of the thirties, or the era of rampant capitalism – art, as perhaps today's last refuge for humanity (such is the general thrust of the stage work) no longer has a chance of survival in public consciousness. Its transcendence is understood by only a few; it does the rounds as a secret message between likeminded people who, in it and through it, are once again able to experience the old human values of love and solidarity, as well as the idea of beauty. And these experiences will triumph over all violence – however gloomy the plot, at the end this secret hope remains.

A "speck of light": this image, which actually provides the title for the middle movement of the orchestral composition *Protuberanzen* (1985-86), has been present as a metaphor in Klaus Huber's work since the early seventies. It represents what Walter Benjamin called the "weak messianic force", which is the only basis for hope. Klaus Huber calls it a "shimmer of hope, and also the shaking of iron gates". In doing so, he also reminds us of the practical consequences. This is the counterpart to the other pervasive metaphor, that of the instrumental shriek which is found constantly, from his *Golgotha* piece *Tenebrae* (1966/67), via *Erniedrigt – Geknechtet – Verlassen – Verachtet...*, right up to the chamber cantata *Die Seele muss vom Reittier steigen...*, written in 2002 on a text by Mahmoud Darwish.

It is in the tension between screaming and hoping, between expression and construction, that Klaus Huber's music unfurls its power of witness, and its beseeching quality. And like the lines he has often used from Ossip Mandelstam's Voronez Poems

*“And silent work puts silver, fine silver
on the iron plough, the sound of the poet's voice”*

his own writing has grown ever more refined as years go by. In the process, the often provocative utterances have not been watered down, but are more subtly registered, even more precisely chiselled, and the “metanoiete!”, the call for change that runs through his work like a leitmotiv, has gained in suggestive power through being internalised.

New Horizons

With the development of third-tones during the “Mandelstam Phase”, and the parallel appropriation from 1991 onwards of constructional procedures from Arab music, along with all its cultural and historical backdrops, a radical reorientation came into Klaus Huber's thinking. For him, study of the new scales and their laws was a practical critique of the traditional European pitch system, and of 12-note tempered tuning. As a violinist whose ear was not reconciled to tempered intervals, the standardised uniformity of this system had always bothered him. Now, increasingly, it struck him as sterile. In the underexplored world of third-tones, used in conjunction with a free adaptation of Arab maqam structures, he saw a possibility of redefining melody, as a succession of specific intervallic qualities. This had consequences for all the other dimensions of music, leading to fundamental changes in harmony, rhythm, and the whole musical gesture.

It is very rare that, at the age of over seventy, a composer sits down afresh and rethinks his craft from the bottom up, so as to open up new compositional territory. Stravinsky's turn to serialism in the fifties is one such case. But when, in the nineties, Klaus Huber submits his compositional thinking to equally profound revision, this is not just a sign of a renewed creative departure, and persisting artistic curiosity. There is another kind of quality that resonates here: the willingness to face up to the ruinous present, and daring to try to represent the world once again – through a work of art – as a fragile whole.

New Complexity with a timeless cantus firmus

What this assumes is a new, complex form of subjectivity. It assimilates otherness, strangeness, without losing the ground beneath its feet, and leads to a sort of composite identity. It is the appropriate answer to the challenges that globalisation poses to the artistic individual. This path forward is one that Klaus Huber has embarked on with a mixture of instinct and systematic planning. His artistic rapprochement with Arab music – and previously with Asian and Latin-American cultures – has made him open to otherness in a productive way. In this unfamiliar world, that so often seems dangerous, he has discovered his own traits, and his Arabian excursions have recovered some of the common roots of Western and Oriental traditions. It may seem astonishing that someone like Klaus Huber, who is not only Swiss, but a descendant of hill farmers into the bargain, has set such far-reaching processes of cultural assimilation in motion. The Swiss are better known for being supposedly rooted in the soil. But one might surmise that it is precisely this down-to-earth

quality (or what remains of it) that gives him the security to engage with the world so unreservedly. And one might surmise something else: within the artistic harvests he has brought back from his wanderings in distant places, there is a secret cantus firmus – the undercurrent of subjective feeling that is, plainly, the emotional abode of the modern individual. One may find the right words for this in the motto that Heinz Holliger, Huber’s musical fellow traveller over many years, has placed above his musical birthday greeting, printed on page 46/47. It was formulated almost 600 years ago by Heinrich von Lauffenberg, the late-medieval writer of song lyrics: “I wisht that I was home”.

English Translation: Richard Toop