

Enno Poppe

Dented Nature On Enno Poppe's Sonic Language

The start is simple, clear and transparent. Enno Poppe's works often begin with a single building brick. Starting from one distinct motivic cell - 'short/long' or 'high/low', for example – the works grow and proliferate like a plant that gains shape and complexity bit by bit. "I have been looking at mathematical models that describe simulations of how plants grow", Poppe explains. "How do things branch out? How does a new shoot come about?" For example, the theme of his piano variations is just one bar long, and consists of two intervals: seconds. What follows are 840 variations in which Poppe twists this motive in every conceivable way – in terms of interval structure, direction, durations and pitches. The same applies to the four-note 'up-and-down' motive that begins *Holz*, and gradually fan out to form a veritable thicket of sounds.

Poppe, born in 1969 in Hemer (in Saarland), often works with the L-branching familiar from biology, in the sense that he spreads, splits, stretches and compresses motives. In that respect, he engages with sound with the critical detachment of a scientific observer. In his hands, the material breeds, grows and proliferates like a living, dynamic biological culture. There's a particular kind of calculation underlying the working-out of motives: numerical relationships play a significant role in Poppe's scores. He believes in mathematical or scientifically orientated logics that give music consistency. But he is wary of those presumptions about consistency that all too often lead to mere musical tautologies. Looking at the form of a tree, one sees that in nature there are forces at work which the symmetry and regularity of mathematical logics can only formulate in general terms. Accordingly, Poppe enriches the physiognomy of the musical shapes with irregularities. And it is the deviations, mistakes and contradictions within the system, that is, its alleged pathologies, that endow the otherwise rigid organism with its liveliness and particularity. Whatever his reservations about systems, Poppe also finds sheer spontaneity suspect. So as not to become, on the one hand, "one's own slave", dominated by systematic logic, nor subject to arbitrary factors on the other, Poppe is concerned to "act subversively against my own prescriptions, without damaging the posited rules – an interplay of technique and freedom." For him, it's "not a matter of control, but of magnifying one's own world."

Poppe's works not only deal with the growth of organic materials, but also with their basic nature. This aspect is of central significance to the cycle *Holz – Knochen – Öl* (Wood – Bone – Oil) composed between 1999 and 2004. The titles address what is consistent in the works: the pliable stability of the fibrous voice-leading in *Holz*, the hard 'martellatissimo' and dry 'secco' in *Knochen*, and the sticky but energetic stream of interflowing lines in *Öl*. "Titles", says Poppe, "open up associative spaces for the listener." He is certainly not the programmatic, illustrative kind of composer. But for all the rationality with which he drafts and develops music shapes, one shouldn't forget that there are also poetic considerations at the base of these works. The wild, "almost extravagant" (Poppe's phrase) ensemble piece *Scherben* (Shards) confronts the listener with a piling up of fragmentary materials. *Rad* (Wheel) for two synthesizers thrives on circling figures and motives, the rattling of sonic

machinery. And in his music theatre work *Interzone*, based on texts by Marcel Beyer (inspired in turn by William S. Burroughs), he evokes the futuristic sound-world of science fiction scenarios, delineating the insectoid existence central to the narration through whirring groups of notes.

Along with these kinds of poetic ideas, and models derived from natural sciences, one thing that marks Poppe's work is a critical historical awareness. Time after time, he takes up concepts that were hastily discarded in a spirit of revolution, and ponders their contemporary relevance. In *Öl* he revises and rehabilitates the concept of melody. Can one write a work based on melodic, linear material without submitting to the rhetorical gravity of melodic logic? One can, if one subsumes the leading voice within a context of timbre, harmony and contrary motion. Can one imagine a work that imitates the cyclic circling of *lieder*, but doesn't become rigidly schematic? In his quintet *Gelöschte Lieder* Poppe solves this problem by having two levels of material constantly interpenetrating, creating constant ambivalence in relation to the sections' formal functions. Even an idea which is central to Poppe's concept of sound, namely the technique of sum- and difference-tones, refers back to the electro-acoustic technique of ring-modulation, is now regarded as 'historic': by adding and subtracting two frequencies he gets new, non-tempered intervals that give his music its palely luminous coloration, intervals that shimmer, but don't clash. "Perhaps one could describe my chords as distorted spectral chords", Poppe summarises, "or as dented nature".

For all this, Poppe has never renounced dramatic, even magical moments. The blurred cantilena that sometimes comes to the surface in the *Gelöschte Lieder*, the sombre *morendo* with which *Öl* fades away, or the narrow tenth-tone piano clusters at the end of *Rad*, as if the music had suffered an electric shock – these are moments where both sensuality and emphatic expression assert their rights.

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