

Composing Outside the Norms: Hans Wüthrich

It's only more cowardly composers (...) who develop a personal style by the age of thirty, and then do what the old masters did too: they stick to the same method till retirement.

Mathias Spahlinger

The standard explanations don't work: the principle of cause and effect doesn't apply, nor does the discourse (usually regarded as sensible enough) about a personal compositional history. The oeuvre of Hans Wüthrich is a succession of surprises, of leaps, that defy any logical, straight-line discussion. Style has become problematic: Mathias Spahlinger points that out bluntly and trenchantly. At any rate, with Wüthrich the sceptic, the collapse of style assumes drastic forms. It's true that he doesn't basically distrust his own paths. But he subjects himself to constant scrutiny.

Politics, communication, time and multimedia: these are the poles between which most of Hans Wüthrich's works are located. Imaginative verbal games can be found in the conceptually and compositionally astonishing *Wörter Bilder Dinge* for contralto and string quartet (1989/91). Wüthrich, who earlier studied literary and linguistic theory, translates individual articles from the 1948 Geneva Convention of Human Rights into Egyptian hieroglyphics, and then translates the pictures back into Italian, German, French and English. Wüthrich has these words intoned in a sort of slow-motion articulation. Language is stretched to bursting point, while the strings follow these painful events. All pitches are derived from the formants of the resultant vowels.

“So the words are freed from the trivial, stale business of language, made larger than life through clear, overstretched pronunciation, and thus brought into direct, obtrusive proximity” (from the preface to the score). Wüthrich's barbs can be directed not only towards 'stale' linguistic usage, but also against authoritarian structures. Born in 1937, in Swiss Aeschi, he has evolved various socio-musicological models whose critical spirit very much connects with the politically highly-charged atmosphere of the 60s and 70s, and finds its most drastic expression in composers like Vinko Globokar. In the series of works *Netzwerk I-III* (1982; 1985; 1987/89), Wüthrich has the orchestra play without a conductor. He really takes the gloves off with self-monitoring complicated constructs. His complex cybernetic systems – already put to the test in the *Kommunikationsspielen* for any ensemble from 1973 – result in an “autonomous, quasi-social organism” (Thomas Meyer).

What fascinated Wüthrich about his former teacher Klaus Huber was his attitude of “going to the heart of things, to their extreme intellectual limits”. What impressed him in Dieter Schnebel was the latter's “audacity, faced by every prejudice, to do and permit whatever one thought was right.” What Wüthrich has in common with Schnebel and Mauricio Kagel is a crossing of multimedia boundaries, and intellectual pleasure in playfulness. In *Leve. 16 Szenen mit drei Frauen, drei Männern und Objekten* (1992, based on texts by Fernando Pessoa and the composer, there is a scene where drops from infusion bottles, electronically amplified, bounce off various materials. The speed of the drops gradually increases, quickly resulting in a striking visual and acoustic counterpointing of different temporal processes.

On dealing with time: naturally music is the temporal art per se. But Hans Wüthrich deals explicitly with durations and processes, and seeks to make the listener very consciously aware of this. The slow-motion articulations in *Wörter Bilder Dinge* exemplify this, as do the ‘stills’ from *Happy Hour, music theatre for twelve singers/speakers, two keyboards percussion and objects (1994-97)* that drives the mindless behaviour of a party society exhausted by work to absurd extremes. In the second movement of *Chopin im TGV Basel-Paris, die Sonne betrachtend*, for flute, violin and piano (1989) one encounters once again a radical reduction of speed, though this is offset by a scurrying first movement. Incessantly, the violin and flute churn out a quarter-tone-tinged chain of triplets that ultimately just breaks off (in a manner reminiscent of Wüthrich’s like-minded compatriot Urs Peter Schneider)

From 2004 to 2006, the near-70-year-old penned *Zwölf Phasen eines Cocons und fünf dynamische Kreuze* for ten instrumentalists. Once again Wüthrich, who says of himself that he starts “every piece from more or less degree zero”, seems to have re-invented his musical language. In this case the model was the micro-organisms that multiply in a cocoon. The piece begins slowly, even doggedly. Individual notes interlock, forming an almost impenetrable mass of sound. Bit by bit, the complexity increases, and the network of relationships becomes denser. Here, in this composition created for the Swiss Rümelingen Festival, there is the kind of straight-line development that listeners to Wüthrich’s music are usually denied. The exception to the rule – this pervades thye Hand Wüthrich phenomenon at every level.

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