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## Richard Toop

### Donaueschingen 1983

Donaueschinger Musiktage, 14-16 October 1983

The Donaueschinger Musiktage could be summarised as 'short but spectacular': a 48-hour festival with an emphasis on orchestral concerts and an obsession with premières. In recent years the policy has been to secure one new work from a major composer—Lachenmann in 1980, Boulez in 1981, Nono in 1982, and Stockhausen in 1983—and leave the rest to younger composers, or else to 'neglected' ones (a dubious category—it all too easily becomes a euphemism for 'also-rans'). This year the 'youngsters' were Hans Jürgen von Bose (b. 1953), Christoph Delz (b. 1950), Manuel Hidalgo (b. 1956), Joachim Krebs (b. 1952), and Robert Platz (b. 1951), while the candidates for redressed neglect were Cristóbal Halffter, Eugen-Mihail Martón, and Klaus Huber.

Huber's massive choral work *Erniedrigt-Geknechtet-Verlassen-Verachtet* opened the festival. This 80-minute epic was problematic, to say the least. Ideologically it made all the right (or rather, all the left) genuflections: highly emotive texts from a variety of sources, depicting the *via dolorosa* of South America's oppressed and starving millions, were set with suitably apocalyptic pathos (that is, very loudly). The composer's *a priori* determination to write a masterpiece was all too sadly apparent. Startling degrees of complication (rather than complexity) were achieved by the deployment of five conductors and sundry assistants to marshal an ensemble of four principal soloists, a 16-part chamber choir, a substantial 'normal' choir, a large orchestra, occasional slides, and tape. Whether this Gargantuan apparatus was necessary—or even desirable—to characterise the sufferings of the poor is, frankly, debatable: at times one couldn't help wondering whether a single voice with guitar might not have touched off some deeper inner resonances. At any rate, for me the effect was like that of an artist's palette on which all possible pigments have been furiously and indiscriminately mixed—a sort of impenetrable, marginally scatological grey-green-brown.

Of the younger composers, two were avowed neoromantics: von Bose (strange how many representatives of the 'new inwardness' seem to have aristocratic surnames) and Krebs. I must confess to a certain aversion from the whole neoromantic school, and my judgments are coloured accordingly; still, even within the style's own terms of reference, the new pieces were nothing to shout about. Von Bose's *Sappho-Gesänge* for mezzo-soprano and chamber orchestra, in which the narcissistic character of the texts and their 'fragmentary' pathos were predictably reflected in the music, inevitably called to mind Dallapiccola's settings of some 40 years ago—a comparison that was greatly to the disadvantage of the younger composer, who seems to have serious difficulties with orchestration as soon as the dynamic level exceeds *mezzo-piano*. Ultimately I retained only a certain gestural impression of the piece; nothing really stayed in my head—surely a rather crucial flaw in a work that sets such a premium on 'communication'? (The same feeling of elusiveness persisted when the work was broadcast by Sudwestfunk a couple of weeks later.) Joachim Krebs's song

cycle *Traumkraut* (awful title—like a culinary version of Rilke) had at least the merit of being well orchestrated, but it was so dependent on an early-Schoenberg/Zemlinsky ethos as to make its very existence a virtual tautology.

In between these two vocal works came *Chlebnikov*, a 30-minute piece for nine instruments by Robert HP Platz. Platz's music is usually complex and speculative: *Chlebnikov* was no exception, and it was clear that in the context of the festival the composer was being paraded as a sort of bogeyman (much to his own irritation and distress, as I learned later); that image was underlined by the fact that Peter Eötvös, the conductor of the two neoromantic offerings, left it to Platz (at rather short notice) to direct his own piece. Certainly *Chlebnikov* had its problems, both technical and musical. For one thing, it clearly overtaxed the young players of the Ensemble Modern der Gesellschaft für Neue Musik. For another, I felt that, particularly towards the end, the development and transformation of the nine basic musical 'characters' were not sufficiently drastic to sustain interest, especially in the notoriously bland acoustic of the Donauhalle. (In this case the subsequent broadcast made a more favourable impression.) Nevertheless, on the evidence of other works, such as *Schwelle* for orchestra and *Rapport* for chamber ensemble, Platz is a composer to watch out for.

Another name to conjure with is that of Christoph Delz, whose cheerfully provocative *Im Dschungel* brought the festival to a close with nearly unanimous expressions of approval that clearly surprised even the composer. The work is a 'homage to the Douanier Rousseau' and mixes orchestral 'transcompositions' of animal sounds from the African jungle with, among other things, the taped sounds of the mechanical saw that plagued Delz in his Cologne flat while he was trying to write the piece. If good-humoured effrontery were a self-sufficient aesthetic quality, *Im Dschungel* would be a masterpiece. As it is, the work shows a lot of talent and promise, but also proves that Delz has a few lessons to learn about consistency of purpose.

The other works in the final concert (confidently directed by Kazimierz Kord with the Sudwestfunk orchestra) were less happily chosen. The spindly dilettantism of Eugen-Mihail Martón's mercifully brief *Orchesterstück* for 22 players scarcely merits serious discussion. Webern is dead, after all, and for anything that this piece had learned from him about fragmentation he might never have existed. Then there was *Harto* by Manuel Hidalgo, a former pupil of Lachenmann. The teacher's shadow lay heavily on Hidalgo's work; unfortunately, where this kind of bleak, resolutely anti-beautiful aesthetic is concerned, Lachenmann is in a class of his own: none of his pupils seems able to offer much more than a surface impression of the real thing. In particular, *Harto* lacks the pitiless persistence and exemplary sense of timing that pervades Lachenmann's recent music.

So, in the end, it was left to the old conjuror from Cologne to lend substance to the festival. A decade ago that might have been self-evident; but these days, ever since Stockhausen established his 'hot-line to Sirius', there's always room for doubt. The external paraphernalia of 'Kathinkas Gesang' (part of *Samstag* from the enormous *Licht* project) gave little cause for optimism: the latest Stockhausen protégée (the excellent flautist Kathinka Pasveer), dressed in a slinky catsuit ('Cat-thinker', of course), an impossibly didactic programme note, promising an equally schoolmasterly piece, and above all the

music-theatre genre, which hasn't always been Stockhausen's happiest hunting-ground. But astonishingly it all worked. The flautist's excursions around two large, circular boards displaying the 24 parts of the basic 'formula' proved to be charming rather than embarrassing (apart from an archly delivered 'Aha', which was immediately taken up by part of the audience at the second performance), and six percussionists clad in black and silver, standing almost motionless on raised platforms around the public, managed to inhabit a convincing niche somewhere between Kagel's *Zwei-Mann-Orchester* and *The Wizard of Oz*. In essence the piece is a highly resourceful, 35-minute flute solo, with pitched and unpitched percussion adjuncts. Needless to say, Stockhausen makes higher claims for it. He intends it as music for the purification of the soul during the 49 days (seven times the seven days of *Licht*) that follow death, and recommends, apparently in all seriousness, that the piece be used as such, in a version for flute alone, or with tape, or with the six percussionists, depending on one's musical and financial resources. (I wonder what the royalties on 49 performances would amount to.) I doubt whether any music could take that treatment and survive as art, rather than ritual—certainly 'Kathinkas Gesang' couldn't. Still, if not a masterwork, it's clearly the work of a master: as ever, the next star composer at Donaueschingen will have a hard act to follow.

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