

York Höller



York Höller photo © Hanne Engwald

An introduction to York Höller's music by Helmut Rohm

The composer York Höller has consistently and undogmatically followed his own path, without undue involvement in either the agitated stylistic debates or the often vehement disputes over personal reputation which have dominated recent music history. It is rather the pursuit of developmental logic that is of central importance both for his musical output and for the course of his artistic career. Among the European composers of his generation, Höller is arguably the one who has most convincingly achieved and continues to achieve the synthesis of diverse stylistic and philosophical concepts. He achieves this not in an eclectic manner but with the partly intuitive, partly rational power of vision which alone produces the new, the original, the distinctive.

In the sixties, Höller studied composition with Bernd Alois Zimmermann and Herbert Eimert and piano with Alfons Kontarsky at the Musikhochschule in Cologne. During this time, important and defining impulses also came from studies with Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. But it was not long before Höller began to harbour growing doubts about integral serialism from a theoretical as well as a philosophical and aesthetic perspective. In the late sixties, while working as répétiteur at the opera in Bonn, Höller began to devote himself to questions of information theory and stochastic processes. Extended periods of work at the Electronic Studio of WDR (West German Radio) led to his first live-electronic compositions in 1973/74. Over the years, Höller also gradually intensified his artistic activity in France following a stay at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris in 1974/75.

In the late seventies, Höller began to develop his ever-evolving concept of "Gestaltkomposition". His openness to international discourse has acted as a catalyst, together with his distinct ability to explore without ideological barriers various aspects and conditions of artistic experience, whether from an historical, anthropological or psychological viewpoint. In his search for archetypal elements he studied facets of Gregorian plainchant, central elements of Western music history, and the sounds and rhythms of non-European cultures. He perfected his method of developing a work, or even a complete cycle of pieces, organically from the "genetic code" of an almost cellular "sound shape".

This sound shape is always more than the mere material of a tone row or interval row which forms the basis in orthodox dodecaphonic thought; it must already

contain a secret, a teleological direction, the breath of life, as in a seed. The references within this musical cell gain importance for all dimensions of the musical form: melody, harmony and temporal structure. Höller's method, which he himself calls "permanent development", is always open to spontaneous intervention and the fantasy of the creative impulse.

More than any other composer, Höller is concerned with blending the dimensions of electronic sound with traditional instrumental and vocal music. Through the tension between these polarised mediums, new worlds open up to his extravagant sound sensibility, at times inspired by mythical and dreamlike ideas. He explores these and invites us, his listeners, to travel with him.

Höllers's two-act opera *Der Meister und Margarita* was premiered at the Paris Opéra with resounding and lasting success in 1989. Höller himself wrote the libretto based on the novel of the same name by Mikhail Bulgakov: it was the tragic fate of a politically persecuted artist depicted with theatrical colour and surreal complexity that fascinated him. It is Höller's power of reflection and his ability, in re-examining his own concepts, of always finding individual solutions and translating them into a 'telling' and comprehensible form that characterise his work after *Der Meister und Margarita*. Representing this period are a series of large-scale and impressive works, including *Fanal* for trumpet and orchestra, *Pensées* for piano, orchestra and live electronics, *Aura*, *Margaritas Traum* and *Widerspiel* for two pianos and orchestra.

The German Bundestag commissioned Höller to write a farewell piece to commemorate the final sitting of parliament in Bonn. With *Aufbruch* he characteristically succeeded in finding a solution for this piece of representational music that did justice to his idea of the gradual development of an individual 'nucleus'.

Höller wins over listeners without suspending the essential achievements of New Music. The question of 'material' is, however, no longer as important as in his earlier creative phases. The shaping of psychological 'energy fields' (morphogenetic fields) has gained greater prominence, as he once explained using the orchestral piece *Aura* as an example: "I used the mythical image of *Aura* because within it I see the archetypal dualistic confrontation between the gentle (*Aura*) and forceful (*Dionysus*) emotions. The union of these creates extreme tensions bordering on madness which can be resolved only in death."

Such energetic tensions also inform Höller's most recent works, from the solo piece *Scan* for flute through the ensemble compositions *Klangzeichen*, *Fluchtpunkte* or *Feuerwerk* to the large orchestral cycle *Sphären* for which Höller received the Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition 2010.

The ideas expressed in the above quote are closely tied to a concept of form which he describes in the following way: "Non-identity is characteristic of art in our century, but it can only be non-identical in relation to some other thing. What is this other thing? In art, it is form and always form. Without form there is neither identity nor non-identity, but only interchangeability and entropy. These I attempt to avoid to the best of my ability."

Unity of thought, the synthesis of opposites, an involvement in the reality of pluralistic phenomena, the raising of diverse elements onto a higher plane: in these things York Höller is a master.

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