

Frank Michael Beyer



Frank Michael Beyer photo © Detlef Maugsch

“Let your light shine so before men, that they may see your good works.” This sentence from the Bible applies to composers even more than to the general public it was addressed to. Their works connect with the present and yet, simultaneously, they transcend the limits of time, speaking not only to their contemporaries, but also to the generations they do not know and who know nothing of them. Thus, in a musical work, time becomes hope and hope becomes time fulfilled.

Works of art look back to history as well. History gains significance through the horizon of the future and substance through the past on which it rests. Both these dimensions of history are present in Frank Michael Beyer's compositions, to a certain extent accounting for their inherent sense of time. Within the vast universe of music history, there are two composers who became universal benchmarks for Beyer: Johann Sebastian Bach and Anton Webern. He knew Bach's music from his childhood years, his father having published a book on the man he considered to be, along with Max Reger, the be-all and the end-all of Western music. For Frank Michael Beyer, Bach remained an object of eternal curiosity, a mine of constant discoveries. It was during his studies in the 1950s that Beyer also became acquainted with the music of Anton Webern. It was not only their strictness of thought that drew him towards these two composers. They also made him realise the liberating effect that the absolute command of compositional methods had on musical imagination and representation. Time and again, he juxtaposed Bach and Webern in various constellations, extending the arc of tension between them in two directions. Firstly, towards the historical foundations on which Bach composed his works and, secondly, towards the possible future developments to follow from Webern's music. The delicate polyphony and the layers and groupings of his choir work *Et resurrexit*, premiered in 2003, were inspired by the old, many-voiced works of composers like Josquin or Thomas Tallis. In particular, it was the idea of transforming an increasingly dense network of parts into an almost breathing, vibrant sound. This arch of time runs through Frank Michael Beyer's whole output – sometimes more manifest and decisive, sometimes less. It can be felt in the *Fuga fiammata* for orchestra, generated from the sequence of notes that “Bach made the subject of the final movement of his Partita in E minor.” Like Webern's tone rows, the sequence is based on a three-note cell and mysteriously directs the musical process from the background, coming to the surface only at significant moments. This way of structuring the music in groups and scales of notes is characteristic of Beyer's earlier works. It suggests a similarity to the basic ideas of today's composers, beyond serialism,

electronic music and post-modern re-creations.

His experience of Bach – and in a certain sense of Webern, too – makes it impossible for Frank Michael Beyer to divide the spiritual world into neatly marked zones: art here, science there, Christian tradition here, ancient thought there, religious music here, secular there. It is true that he wrote distinctly religious works, like *Biblische Szenen* (Biblical Scenes), *Manifestatio Christi* or *Canticum Mose et Agni* for an eight- to twelve-part choir, as well as works that are clearly intended for secular concert halls. However, he also wrote music across traditional borderlines – a string quartet bearing the title *Missa*, the movements of which are taken from the Ordinary of the Mass, or *Liturgia*, the adaptation of the quartet for string orchestra. Religion and philosophy, faith and reason are no opposites for Beyer, both rather part of his perception of the world, informing the power to create new things. The myths and art of antiquity, where music leads to the heart of human life, are present in works such as the ballet *Geburt des Tanzes* (Birth of Dance), *Griechenland* (Greece) for large orchestra and the violin concerto *Musik der Frühe* (Music of Daybreak). Here, they are intellectual gateways to an aesthetic experience that points from the fragments of the here-and-now into the open. And yet, this openness is where the space of historical time assumes a sense of cohesion.

Talking to Frank Michael Beyer about his works means discussing the work of other composers and their background for most of the time. You soon realise, however, that this is one way of understanding some essential points about Beyer's own work. After all, he sees musical composition as an expression of a spiritual world that has many sources and manifestations. A conversation about Bach's Mass in B minor reveals many discoveries that have gone unnoticed by academics. They have grown out of Beyer's own experience, having sprung from the curiosity of an artist for whom exploration, understanding and creation are all part of the same process. Another conversation, about Scriabin, unfolds a horizon in which the particular way of modernist music appears as a promise still awaiting redemption.

Beyer's work is not limited to composing music. Being a true 'homo culturalis', passing on knowledge and experience is part of his work. Teaching at the former Berlin Arts College (now a University), he shared his understanding and expertise with composition students. While there, he also founded the Institute of New Music and launched the “Musica nova sacra” series, a project which bridged the gulf between the avant-garde and functional music for use in church. He organised the Berlin Bach Days and was a member of the supervisory board of the GEMA, the German organisation for the management of reproduction rights for artists. Between 1986 and 2003 he was director of the music department of the Berlin Academy of the Arts, where he has been a member since 1979. In addition to this, the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts also appointed him a member in 1981.

In recent years, certain features of Beyer's work have become more prominent than in earlier works, where they had already existed, but more as a structural force, remaining in the background. They affect not only configurations of musical ideas but also the role and responsibility of art in society. His oeuvre after 2003 shows an extraordinary amount of solo works – either for one soloist, like the *Metamorphosen* (Homage à A. Scriabin) for solo violin, or for a solo

instrument with orchestra, like the viola concerto *_Notte di pasqua_* and the flute concerto *_Meridian_*. After finishing the first versions of the two latter works, Beyer added a movement or section in each that he had composed later to complete their final architecture. Even *_Choreographie_*, not a solo work but a piece for twelve cellos, mostly draws its energy from the tension between solo and choral impulses. In the middle movement – the core section – of the piano trio *_Lichtspuren_* (Light Traces), one aspect of the polarity between solo piano and the two string instruments is the conflict between assured individualism on the one hand and socialisation of the individual on the other.

For Frank Michael Beyer, compositional consistency is a response to his social perception. In his more recent works, this consistency crystallises mainly in the relation of melos and sound. An example of this is *_Metamorphosen_*, a reflection on Scriabin's sixth piano sonata, which had already fascinated Beyer during his years of study. In the sonata, partly moving, partly insistent melos flows from stagnant or effervescent sounds like the minute drawings of a secret space. In constantly expanding cycles, the imaginary is woven into the music, beyond its physical shape. *_Metamorphosen_*, however, shows Beyer taking the opposite route – melos emerging from sound. Here the imaginary seems to occupy even more space within the harmonic scope, form expanding further than in Scriabin's work, using the same material but exploring a different range of expression. In this freely floating music, time is no longer a rigid measurement scheme but appears, rather, to be a kind of bowl, a vessel enfolding the music.

At the beginning of the flute concerto *_Meridian_*, the hard string chords seem to be gradually melting when the virtuoso solo flute 'radiates' into them. This process, which merges into a short flute solo, is the gateway to a work which, in its final form, is laid out concentrically. This form – a typically musical paradox – is unfolded in time. Two tender, short intermezzi – one for the soloist alone, the other a conversation between flute and violin – enclose a powerful and dynamic central section. The intermezzi themselves are framed by an introduction that opens up large perspectives and a concluding piece which "condenses elements developed as motifs in an all-embracing melos". This basic idea, as expressed in the title, informs the composition on various levels, developing it into a sort of intellectual polyphony. One such level, for example, is the work's concentric structure. Another is the central note B-flat, which pulls together and arranges the centrifugal powers everywhere in the third movement, even when it is not heard, and into which the course of the whole movement converges several times. Lastly, there are the solos surrounding the central section, which are reflected in correspondences and reverberations throughout all the movements.

The idea that, in their later works, artists focus on transcendent matters is an ever-recurring truism. It does not, however, bear verification. For Frank Michael Beyer, issues of life, finality and eternity, of love, death and fulfillment have never been reserved for a certain age. As if opposed to this widespread cliché, his latest works feature a lucid, subtle and sometimes luminescent sound.

Notte di pasqua is the title of his viola concerto, which in 2004 completed a trilogy of concertos for a string instrument with orchestra, following *_Musik der Frühe_* (1992/93) for violin and orchestra and the cello concerto *_Canto di giorno_* (1998/99). His piano trio is called *_Lichtspuren_* (2006). "The title suggests the

power of flooding light, but at the same time it is a reference to the composition itself, to flaring, supporting bridgings" (Beyer). The metaphor of light points to the main currents of the spiritual legacy we all draw on: Greek antiquity, Jewish-Christian tradition and the enlightenment, "man's emergence from self-incurred immaturity" (Kant).

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