

Exploring the depths

Mark Sattler



"To me, composing means thinking in sound." Georg Friedrich Haas

Georg Friedrich Haas will be composer-in-residence at this year's LUCERNE FESTIVAL – and not just because his works are perfectly in keeping with this year's "night" theme. Haas' oeuvre is far more complex. Founded in tradition, it conquers listeners with its truly unprecedented, utopian adventures in sound.

I first encountered Georg Friedrich Haas' music many years ago at Zurich's Schiffbau with a staging of *In vain* by Anna Viebrock. The darkening of the concert room and the flow of the music – that trip-like sound has been etched into my soul, perhaps my subconscious, ever since. A unique piece of new music. This year will finally see more of Georg Friedrich Haas' music performed at the festival. With the "night" theme, it made sense to invite him to be composer-in-residence and to offer a small retrospective performance. Dangerously so because it is almost a clichéd idea: he has already been labelled "the composer of the night" by the press and invited to other festivals with similar themes.

The titles of his works themselves illustrate this: *Nacht-Schatten*, *String*

Quartet No. 3 In iij Noct., the chamber opera Nacht and other titles fit like a glove – but there is a danger that one may fail to look below the surface. It is common knowledge that the dark hampers vision, but enhances hearing all the more. And that is exactly what Georg Friedrich Haas, who is fully aware of the dangerous catchiness of titles, is interested in. Speaking against the restriction and bias of words, he says: “To me, composing means thinking in sound” – which primarily means exploring the depths by listening and thinking.

The composer searches for unearthed treasures in spheres other than the rational light of day or the evenly tempered tuning that clips natural harmonics to fit. His explorations have more in common with “Moon Grammar” (Thomas Mann, Joseph and his Brothers) than with the mystical darkness of a night-obsessed romance. The night as a state of heightened awareness of the senses and enhanced mental ability is more characteristic of the impetus of Haas’ work, especially his explorations in the land of micro-tuning – an aspect I also find interesting with respect to our festival programme.

Haas takes listeners to places where the ground is not as solid as it seems.

Three examples demonstrate the way in which we will be handling Haas’ music. With lecturers from the Kairos Quartet and in cooperation with Lucerne University of Music, a string quartet master course will be held on the third string quartet In iij Noct. Under Haas’ instruction, different string quartets will work on the piece, which is performed in total darkness and which can be heard on 17 September in four different interpretations.

As is generally known, in his Hölderlin-based opera Nacht, the composer refers to the “night of the soul”: “To me, the word ‘night’ is not connected with romanticised ideas, but with a loss of reality and hopelessness, with mental derangement, with the loss of utopias.” This is illustrated by Hölderlin’s words: “There is a silence, an oblivion of all existence, in which it seems that

we have lost everything, a night of the soul where no star glimmers nor even a rotting piece of wood gives us light.” We can therefore look forward to a première at the festival on 16–17 September. The director Desirée Meiser and stage and costume designer Nives Vidauer will stage a new production of the piece, with the aid of a thermal imaging camera.

Haas’ relationship to Hölderlin, which means so much to him, will be explored in depth at a workshop concert as part of the LUCERNE FESTIVAL ACADEMY on 20 August. The concert will showcase different versions of the solo and chamber music works ... aus freier Lust ... verbunden and the ensemble piece ... Einklang freier Wesen ... and will be presented by Georg Friedrich Haas. The publisher of the Frankfurt edition of Hölderlin, D. E. Sattler, will also talk about the words taken from Hölderlin’s Hyperion. Haas and Sattler, whom Haas holds in great esteem and whose work also blazed the way for Luigi Nono and other composers, will meet there for the first time.

Along with in vain and String Quartet No. 6, which was written for the Hagen Quartet and recently premièred in Salzburg, there will also be a second première on 10 September. Georg Friedrich Haas is currently working on his seventh string quartet with live electronics for the Arditti Quartet and the SWR Experimentalstudio – a piece commissioned for the festival.

As far as catchiness is concerned, Haas’ two works Hyperion, Concerto for light and orchestra and limited approximations (for six microtonally tuned pianos and orchestra) are by no means easy to comprehend. With their utopian approach, which goes beyond any conventional production format, they are a challenge for any event organiser and await us too. We will accept the challenge because we need this music.

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