

“Optimistic generosity”

Every composer depends on his performers. This has never been more true than for the composers of our time. Wolfgang Rihm challenges his performers again and again, but he is also a keen listener and is very encouraging – something for which his performers are very thankful.

*I have always been full of admiration for Wolfgang Rihm – for his unflagging urge to study – indeed, to plumb the depths – of every musical, artistic and human aspect of life. Many years ago, Luigi Nono told me about a highly talented young composer named Wolfgang Rihm, and so I began my involvement with him and started performing his music. We founded the Wien Modern festival in 1988 in Vienna, initially presenting works by Ligeti, Kurtág, Nono and Boulez; the young Wolfgang Rihm was also invited. Since then and to this day it has been my good fortune to conduct many world premieres of his pieces. **Claudio Abbado***

I think Rihm is a string-quartet-composer depending on which quartet he is writing for. I've heard orchestral works that are very classically orientated, and that don't sound like the same composer. I remember hearing Mnemosyne for soprano and orchestra, which was written for the Berlin Philharmonic, and that's a very classically orientated piece, and I suppose that the fourth quartet written for the Alban Berg Quartet and the ninth, written for the Emerson Quartet, are more classical than the ones he wrote for us; more lyrical, more harmonic content.

The Arditti Quartet inspires composers to go to the limits of their creative desires, so in some ways he's not restricted by technical limitations, and I think that's very true of most of the pieces that Wolfgang has written for us. They're very energetic pieces, very difficult pieces. The fifth quartet is a very complex 25 minute one-movement driving piece that takes quite a lot of energy to perform. The fifth was a departure for him I think.

Irvine Arditti

I still clearly remember my first encounter with Wolfgang Rihm's musical poetry; it was my first CD, a recording of Alban Berg's Violin Concerto and Rihm's Gesungene Zeit with Anne-Sophie Mutter. At the time, I was still a

very keen violin pupil – and I was enchanted by Rihm’s art from the very first moment I heard it. It was inconceivable then that I would one day meet him in person and even give the premieres of some of his pieces – but in 2004 I had the great good fortune to present the first performance of three of his settings of Hölderlin at the Alpenklassik Festival in Bad Reichenhall, and I was even able to meet him in person.

For me, it is a great privilege to be an interpreter of his works. It is difficult to describe the richness of his music’s colour in words; when I sing it, sounds and colours arise in me which I would call spheric, shimmering, interwoven with blood-red light, earthen, mellifluous, sensual and powerfully physical. His sonic language has a direct, sensual, fascinating effect on me; there is nothing abstract about it.

*I am also ineffably grateful for the trust Rihm has often placed in me by including me in the first performances of his works, even writing expressly for me and my voice in pieces such as *Fremdes Licht* (Bavarian Radio, 2006), the monodrama *Proserpina* (Schwetzingen, 2009) and the opera-fantasia *Dionysos* (Salzburg Festival, 2010). I am surprised and moved every time by how well he knows my vocal capabilities, how fittingly his sonic language harmonises with my personality and, moreover, how I can entrust my soul to his music.*

Of course, it is always a great challenge to approach and embrace a new Rihm composition; indeed, there have been moments when I was not sure that I was up to their demands. At such times I was always very grateful to sense the warm-heartedness and trust he expressed for me, his optimism and benevolence, which gave me new energy, confidence and strength.

Dear Wolfgang, I wish you all the very best, with all my heart, on your sixtieth birthday; may you continue to inspire all of us, the world, with your warm-heartedness and your fantastical art for many years to come.

Mojca Erdmann

*Everything he writes is part of his biography. In that sense, he is part of the same tradition as someone like Schönberg. His work is always autobiographical. He writes for the player he’s writing for. I clearly remember when I premiered the Cello Concerto. He gave me the music in a restaurant in Basel; my wife says I turned ashen. I said, “Wolfgang, forget it, it can’t work, it’s impossible.” The whole way through, the piece is nothing but fast notes, sixteenths, fortissimo, almost everything in the lowest register. After 10 minutes, you feel as if your arm is falling off. And he said, “No, no – you can do it.” He has the feeling, “I want to write this for him.” Just as *Gesungene Zeit* is a piece for Anne-Sophie Mutter,*

it's the same for many other pieces.

Lucas Fels

I remember very well my first meeting with Wolfgang Rihm. It was in 2002, in the Orangerie, Darmstadt.

ensemble recherche was about to play his Musik für drei Streicher. (Melise, Barbara and Lucas's performance was, I have to say, simply unforgettable – remarkable in its exemplary balance between precision and expressive richness.)

Reeling from the impact of both piece and performance, I asked Wolfgang (idiotic question) "How did you do it, at such a tender age?" He shrugged his shoulders, and seemed to share my bewilderment. He reminded me of the captain of a ship, looking back on the many patterns and shapes caused by his ship's wake, with curiosity but distance from the outcome of his journeying.

This sense of distance from his profoundly personal output manifests itself in other, more critical, ways. In rehearsal for a performance of Sotto Voce II – the piece Wolfgang wrote for the Busoni Competition, and which I had the honour of premiering – he provided an exemplary example of at least one kind of performer-composer relationship. At one point the conductor turned to Wolfgang and asked (over my head, literally and figuratively) whether I was "allowed" to play a certain phrase in the way I was choosing to. Without hesitation, Wolfgang said "He's the interpreter: he can do what he wants." Wolfgang's gesture was a hugely important one for me: it was an expression of trust, and curiosity about what I would produce.

His trust in performers is a sign of wisdom: it allows him to join in the process of discovering his music in performance, hand-in-hand with his performers. This makes working with him a special and pleasurable experience. Happy Birthday, dear Wolfgang, and thank you for your company, friendship and – now above all is the time to say it – for your wonderful music.

Nicolas Hodges

I am overjoyed that I was the one to give the premiere performances of three of Rihm's works so far: Gesungene Zeit (1992), Lichtes Spiel (2010) and Dyade for violin and double bass (2011) – although that good fortune is shadowed by great self-doubt, especially in the phase of working out his compositions; in view of his almost overpowering esprit and charm, I was constantly asking myself how I could meet the challenge and contend with him and his works. Rihm's unique poetry, the weightless transparency of his heavenly harmonies

– indeed, his absolutely unfettered imagination in dealing with the traditional capabilities of the violin – are a liberation from laws previously considered ironclad – and he does it, apparently, without effort. Succinctly said, he discovers the violin anew each and every time, dismissing its limitations in every work he writes for my instrument.

As an interpreter of his great works, I not only owe Rihm my deepest thanks – I am also profoundly grateful for his patient and optimistic generosity when dealing with the likes of us mortal musicians.

To Wolfgang Rihm, whom I cannot esteem too greatly, all my very best wishes for his 60th birthday – for myself, I hope that I may assist him as midwife as often as possible in the future.

Anne-Sophie Mutter

I cannot remember the first time I heard his name at all. Was it when my father directed *Die Hamletmaschine*? – or was it in one of the stories my late friend Richard Salter told? – Wolfgang composed several leading roles for him.

There was also a world premiere in Berlin for Claudio Abbado's 75th birthday in 2009 – *Mnemosyne*, a work made of crystal, as subtle as it is emotional; the metre is regular, but the bar lines blur like sunbeams on the water surface. I was very happy to sing the soprano part. I met "Herr Rihm" for the first time during rehearsals in the Philharmonie, and it was clear at once; a genius can also be a human being – and what a wonderful one!

Anna Prohaska

Wolfgang Rihm and the clarinet: we had no idea back then that our meeting in 1998 would result in about 10 (more or less) extensive works for clarinet being written for me. Rihm was my teacher then and we are still close friends, even though our friendship – he, the composer, I the interpreter – is extraordinary – like his music.

In actual fact it was 1999, summertime, when the score of *Music for Clarinet and Orchestra (Über die Linie II)* landed in my mailbox. Looking through it curiously, I was initially shocked – it was 40 minutes of almost uninterrupted song through all the instrument's ranges, including the highest, stratospheric ones. No one had ever written for the clarinet that way before. Well: how was I supposed to play it?

First, I quit smoking (although I unfortunately started again on the evening of the world premiere). A kind of athletic training was also necessary to meet the extreme challenges to physical fitness, strength and control. I fell in love with the piece at once – the only other composer who wrote in such a cantilena

way, all but precluding mere virtuoso passagework, was Johannes Brahms (Rihm described him as having “wound virtuosity down to the point of unplayability”) – pure sound, pure song, without decorative elaboration – and Rihm’s piece was equally difficult to play. Or else, consider Schumann’s Fantasiestücke Op. 73, which disregard the player’s need to breathe (and heart rate) over three cantabile movements played attacca. Thus Rihm’s Clarinet Concerto equals about thrice three Fantasiestücke.

I notice in the development of Rihm’s music for clarinet during the past 12 years just how closely he has listened to me. By that I do not mean my comments on playing technique (e.g. the time when I jokingly remarked on the telephone that, instead of changing an impossible glissando, he should “help it along with voice if need be” – that suggestion is reflected in the printed UE score) – I mean my playing itself.

Over and over again, he has always been capable, sensitive and eager to interact with his interpreters, to make ever new demands on them and himself, to arrive at new realms of expression, colours and sounds; all this has led to his most beautifully crafted compositions for clarinet. I hope and wish – and I am sure – that they will endure.

Jörg Widmann



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