

On the magic of “pure” intervals

Georg Friedrich Haas in an interview with Heinz Rögl



Georg Friedrich Haas

Mr Haas, you have found a “sound” – an unmistakable style. How easy is that for a composer to achieve?

Haas: Even though it wasn't your intention, I almost take that as a reproach. My initial response must be that I hope one of my next compositions will have some quality about it that can't be described as "typical Haas". Sitting down and crafting your own "personal style" certainly doesn't work, and other composers have never succeeded in doing that either.

Staying with the recognition factor and this alleged personal style: your music grew, in a purely technical respect, out of aspects such as an interest in the range of overtone colours in music, or the meticulous exploration of microtonality as first adopted by the composers Ivan Wyschnegradsky or Alois Hába. And you have independently developed and adapted microtonality.

Haas: Just to bring things back down to earth a bit as far as microtonality is concerned: of course it plays a major role in my compositional work, but I don't believe it plays a significantly larger role than in the work of the majority of my colleagues.

For example, at a panel discussion in Warsaw I told Enno Poppe that if one were to hold an Olympic Games for microtonality, he would finish quite a few places ahead of me. The harmony of Ivan Wyschnegradsky, who was one of the pioneers of quarter-tone music, certainly plays a central role in my music, although not in the fact that it is quarter-tone, but in the semitonal approach also used by Wyschnegradsky. If I do quote him, then it is more the non-quarter-tone qualities of the quarter-tone composer. That puts things back into perspective.

I have a rather ambivalent attitude to quarter-tone music. At home I had two pianos tuned a quarter-tone apart which enabled me to explore the concept, and it was naturally very illuminating to experiment with it with a partner as well. However, quarter-tone writing is certainly very abstract and also something that is difficult to grasp just by listening to it. I have experienced excellent orchestras, including those that play a lot of New Music, where the musicians produced the quarter-tones with a relative lack of clarity that was far removed from the precision displayed in their accomplished semitonal playing.

And so by far the more important element in your music is the connection to the spectrum of overtones?

Haas: This plays a major role in my work. I am interested in the unbelievably intense sound quality of "purely" intoned intervals. An overtone chord with

pure tuning.

We are now touching on the expressive components of your music, which also – and this is where we enter the dangerous waters of verbal and thus ideological interpretation and signification – aims to convey messages. In a spectrum that ranges from desperation and sorrow to beauty, passion, intoxication and ecstasy. It is impossible not to be affected existentially by music such as “in vain”.

Haas: Well, of course I'm pleased that it is perceived in this way, but I am unable, or hardly able, to talk about it. My decision when I was 17 years of age to be a composer and not an author might have had something to do with the fact that I noticed that I cannot express myself as precisely in words as in sounds.

You are right, there is sorrow in my music, there is fear, the feeling of being driven, of implacability, of being taken somewhere regardless of whether you want to or not. But – with very few exceptions – it is certainly not the case that I sit down with the aim of setting an aesthetic programme or a story to music. Sometimes it begins with moods. In the case of *in vain* it was my consternation at the formation of a coalition government with the far right in 2000; I composed a piece in which the formal progression revives content at the end of the work that had previously been believed overcome.

As the years have passed, “in vain” has become cult music that astonishes the listener primarily through its enchantingly beautiful sound.

Haas: Other people may respond differently when they hear it, but I still cannot imagine that anybody can perceive the moment when the music from the beginning returns at the end as anything but oppressive. That is enough. You don't need any more. And nowadays we have no need to remember the political situation which gave birth to the piece, thank goodness. At the moment I am glad that this piece has outlived the government. That is a fact, at least.

Your “breakthrough” as an internationally renowned composer in the late eighties was followed by an even larger number of impressive pieces than ever before, starting in – say – 1988/89. Do you see yourself engaged in continual, even linear development in your compositions? Are earlier works put into perspective for you?

Haas: The Duo for Viola and Prepared Piano was composed in 1984 and I still

consider it to be one of my best compositions. The C minor melody at the end, which is repeated a number of times by the viola – whose strings are retuned every time the melody returns – so that the tonality kind of melts away, is certainly something that could exhibit a “personal style”, if that is what you are looking for. Even though it sounds entirely different to my other compositions, and you wouldn’t immediately associate it with me. And I hope that I will be able to write other pieces that are entirely different in the future as well. The works that were written ten years ago can’t really be described as old.

Do you write differently for various groups, ensembles or orchestras, depending on the commission?

Haas: Yes. I always try to compose for each situation in which the work will be performed. I can illustrate that using specific examples. Poème was a commission for the Cleveland Orchestra and I knew there would be hardly any rehearsals because they are extremely expensive in the USA, but I also knew that performers are excellently prepared when they arrive at rehearsals, unlike in Europe. There is a sociological difference: if a musician in the USA arrives at a rehearsal unprepared, he loses his job. If a musician in Europe prepares for a rehearsal, he gets angry glares from the others. That’s just the way it is, and you have to realise it. I encountered the exact opposite with Natures mortes in Donaueschingen, where there were far more rehearsals than usual. And I knew that Sylvain Cambreling was conducting; hardly anybody else is as familiar with my music as he is. In that work I could afford myself the luxury of writing five different overtone rows for a large orchestra. They needed six rehearsals plus realisation. Bruchstück has a single overtone chord, in vain has twelve – because it was for Klangforum.

That means you can do it if you examine each situation.

Haas: The psychology of 24 people is so fundamentally different from that of an orchestra with 85 or 100 members that things which are possible with 24 cannot be realised with 100. My music is still utopian, it still cannot always be fully realised, but after five or ten years it does become possible as by then word has somehow got around and the music has become firmly established. And I can tell you something else: the String Quartet No. 2, which was premiered in 1998 at the Konzerthaus in Vienna, was written for the Hagen Quartet whose members are very open-minded with regard to modern music but tend to focus more on music of past eras. Clemens Hagen, who was also the first soloist to play my Cello Concerto, told me later that they use the expression “Haas intonation” when they play romantic or classical music with pure intonation.

While getting to grips with my piece, they were therefore also made aware of the problems they encountered when playing the other kind of music as well. It is my great hope that orchestras will also understand this, even though it is much more difficult to achieve because of the size of the groups. And I also hope that they realise that I work with exactly the same issues that they are dealing with when they grapple with Schubert and Bruckner. The quality of the performance would benefit greatly from this. Even in tonal music, the strings or wind instruments must produce (and must have produced) microtonal intonation in order to present an expressive performance. The interesting thing is that the composers have always left this to the performers, and it might have something to do with the fact that you would have had to create special musical notation for it. But these are areas with which the instrumentalists are definitely familiar in their tonal music-making when they adjust the tuning of chords. And where there is still a lot of scope for compositional development.